

The World Begins With Tennis

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TezRyo AU in the TWEWYverse. Ryoma has seven days.

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The World Begins With Tennis

[Introduction](#)

[The First Day](#)

[The Second Day](#)

[The Third Day](#)

[The Fourth Day](#)

[The Fifth Day](#)

[The Sixth Day](#)

[The Seventh Day](#)

[Day One](#)

[Day Two](#)

[Day Three](#)

[Day Four](#)

[Day Five](#)

[Day Six](#)

[Day Seven](#)

[Seven Days Left](#)

[Six Days Left](#)

[Five Days Left](#)

[Four Days Left](#)

[Three Days Left](#)

[Two Days Left](#)

[The Last Day](#)

The First Day

Disclaimer: Prince of Tennis does not belong to me. This story was written purely for enjoyment.

Warning: Contains violence and yaoi. If either of these things bothers you, please don't read - this fic is not for you. No complaining about things you were warned about!

Author's Note: I normally veer away from crossover land, but The World Ends With You gave me the bug BAD. Which is inconvenient, as I find games generally suffer awkward transition to fic. Also, given the obscurity of the crossover, I estimate that the target audience of this fic currently stands at about two (if I include myself).

All of that aside, I am posting this anyway. Hopefully someone will enjoy it. Rest assured, I made the fic as friendly to those outside of the TWEWY fandom as possible. It's actually probably more an AU than a true crossover, anyway.

Do not be surprised if you don't know what's going on. That is intentional. Should be a chapter uploaded a day, barring any

The World Begins With Tennis

By Sinnatious

The First Day

Wind rustled through the tree leaves and the hum of cars and thud of footsteps rang in his ears. The ground was gritty, cold, and uncomfortable.

What was he doing on the ground?

Golden eyes blinked owlishly at the unexpected brightness of daylight. He pushed himself to his feet, staggering about for a moment in a sleepy fog. Where was he? A footpath? In front a bus stop, with a digital readout of the next bus's arrival time on the post next to it. There were some people walking past, but none of them paid him any attention whatsoever. Disorientated, he glanced around. There were trees lining the footpath, and he could spy an outdoor mall in one direction, and what looked like a school in the other. If he listened carefully, he could hear the rumble of a train over the drone of traffic. There was a station nearby.

He had absolutely no idea what he was doing there, or how he got there.

None of the people walking past even spared him a glance. He pushed himself back against the wall as a small group of students walked past - they looked like they were about his age. "Hey, can you-"

Ignored. The students continued walking towards the school, chattering amongst themselves. Slightly miffed, he felt about in his pockets, and came up with a handful of pins with strange designs on them. Weird.

He was about to toss the pins into the trashcan when a beeping sound caught his attention, accompanied by a buzz against his thigh.

His phone?

Somewhat cautiously, he pulled the phone from his pocket and flipped it open. Who could be calling him?

The message was short and concise: '*Go to the front of Seigaku. You have 3 hours. Fail, and face erasure.*'

What?

A sharp pain ran through his hand like a bolt of electricity. He winced, nearly dropping the phone and pins, and then opened his palm. Numbers ticked down ominously on it. Three hours?

What the hell was this? A thread of cold fear snaked through him, but he ruthlessly squashed it. He wasn't about to freak out and panic like some helpless kid. It was probably just some chain letter thing. Annoyed, he hit 'delete', but even after deleting it, the message was still there. Weird. Was his phone broken?

A spark from the bus stop timetable caught his attention. Scrolling across the bottom were the words, '*You have 7 days*'.

The words sent a chill through him, but he turned around, determined to ignore them. Maybe rather than a chain letter it was some sort of viral marketing campaign. Where was Seigaku anyway? It sounded like a nickname for a school - probably the one down the road there. But why on earth would it take three hours to walk a couple of blocks?

He'd be better off just ignoring it. He headed towards the outdoor mall instead. He passed an electronics store on the way. Every television displayed the same freaky message: '*You have 7 days*'.

What did it all mean?

He couldn't care less. Although that timer on his hand was sort of unnerving him.

"Hey! Hey!"

Some idiot was running down the street, yelling. He kept walking, hands in pockets and cap down low. None of his business.

"You! The kid with the cap!"

The guy sounded sort of panicked. Annoyed, he turned around, but the sullen retort died on his lips when he caught sight of the weird

creatures chasing the stranger. Frogs? No... not exactly. They resembled frogs, but they were strange colours and parts of them seemed almost insubstantial. Also, since when did frog legs look so sharp?

The guy was quickly getting pinned down. "Hey! Hey, you're a Player, aren't you?! Make a pact!"

He was gone. What happened? Did those creatures... eat him? Destroy him? What? It was like he just blurred from existence - as though a television with bad reception suddenly flicked off.

It left him with a very uneasy feeling.

Then the frogs started hopping towards him.

He wasn't stupid enough to hang around. He took off at a run in the opposite direction. The frogs chased after him, seeming content to ignore everyone else in their pursuit. He was faster, though. Soon, he was far enough away that he felt safe enough to stop and catch his breath. He took big heaving gulps of air, and checked his palm nervously. Half an hour had already passed.

What would happen if the timer reached zero? Suddenly, he very much wanted to know.

"Echizen?"

He whirled around, eyes wild. More creatures?

No. It was another boy, probably about his age, maybe a couple of years older, wearing a pale lavender button-up shirt and black slacks. He was well presented, with perfect posture, neat brown hair, and thin wire-framed glasses. "What?"

The other boy walked closer. Brown eyes widened slightly, though his facial expression didn't otherwise change. "You've got a Player Pin... you're also a Player?"

"Player... what are you talking about? Who are you?!" he snapped, feeling more than a little stressed with some ominous red number counting down on his hand and freaky creatures running about making people disappear.

This time, actual shock showed on the stranger's face. "You don't... Of course. My apologies. I'm Tezuka Kunimitsu."

For a second, he was tempted to just walk off, but this guy looked like the sort who'd hassle him if he didn't introduce himself properly. "Echizen Ryoma." He shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Echizen, you're-" Tezuka cut himself off and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Quickly, we need to make a pact."

"A what-?"

There was a flash of light, and it felt as though something warm yet intangible was enveloping him. It felt sort of nice. Safe.

The safe feeling didn't last. When he opened his eyes - when had he closed them? - he was confronted with the weird frogs again. "What are these things?!" One landed on his leg, and he kicked it off with a wince. Those legs didn't just *look* sharp!

That guy - Tezuka - suddenly wasn't anywhere to be seen, but Ryoma sort of thought he was close. Sure enough, he could hear his voice, even if he couldn't see him anywhere. "Use your pins!"

Use the pins? He grabbed one at random - it was red, and looked sort of fiery. He clutched it in his hand, wondering how to 'use' it, and was surprised to see flames rise from the ground nearby. What-?

There was no time to think about it. He clutched the pin again, and stared at the frogs. They squealed as they were enveloped in pillars of fire, before vanishing from existence much in the same way that other guy had earlier.

Weird. Really, really, weird, but he wasn't about to question it. There was only one left, and he turned to it, ready to fry it like all the others. To his surprise, though, it vanished on its own a moment later, and in that same instant Tezuka was standing by his side again. "You're not hurt?"

"I'm fine. Where did you go?" he asked, a little petulantly.

"With a pact, you fight the noise on different frequencies. It's the only way to beat them, supposedly. I was on a slightly lower frequency."

"Noise... those creatures?" he guessed, awfully confused about the whole affair but not particularly wanting to show it.

"Yes," Tezuka replied patiently. "Now that we have a pact, they should at least stop targeting us. Let's go - we've got less than two hours to get back to Seigaku."

Ryoma squinted, staring into the distance. "The school? The one back over there?"

"We don't know what obstacles might be in our way. It would be careless to leave the mission to the last minute."

"Wait... so you've got a timer too?"

Tezuka held up the palm of his hand. A timer identical to his own ticked down on it.

Things were getting beyond creepy now. "And the message on the phone?"

"The same. All players get the same mission." Brown eyes stared at him, as though expecting a reaction, but Ryoma just met the gaze evenly. "... You weren't paying attention?"

"Paying attention to what?"

Tezuka didn't answer. "We don't have time. I'll fill you in on the parts you missed later." He started striding purposefully towards the school.

Ryoma didn't really want to be relying on anyone, but had to admit that this guy at least seemed to know a lot of useful stuff about everything weird going on, so sullenly followed. Tezuka's stride was annoyingly long, though, and Ryoma had to walk twice as fast to keep up. There was no way that he'd ask him to slow down. And the sight of those weird creatures out of the corner of his eyes - Tezuka called them Noise? - were motivation enough to keep up.

It was only fifteen minutes walk at that pace to reach the school Ryoma had seen in the distance. Classes were already in session, of course - he'd woken up on the footpath when they were just starting. Tezuka stopped at the gate, staring at the school with an odd sort of expression on his face.

"Hey, what's your problem?" he asked grouchily, cranky at having to practically run to keep up with the taller boy.

"It's nothing," Tezuka replied quietly. Still, Ryoma imagined he looked a little... wistful? Regretful? It was hard to guess. Frustrated by the hard-to-read teen, he turned his attention to the rest of his surroundings. There was a plain-looking guy dressed in a school uniform leaning next to the school gate. Shouldn't he be in class?

"Pact confirmed," the stranger muttered - voice quiet enough that he could barely hear him.

As though the words spurred him, Tezuka strode past the school gate. Ryoma was briefly tempted to wait behind just to make a point, but trailed after with a sigh. They stopped near the entrance.

Tezuka glanced at his hand. "Good, the timer's gone. We made it." Dark, serious brown eyes turned back to him.

Ryoma checked his hand too, and sure enough, the red numbers had vanished. "Che, we hurried for nothing. We still had another hour left."

"I suppose they want an easy mission for the first day."

Ryoma shrugged. "Whatever. I'm out of here." The freaky timer was gone, so as far as he was concerned, there was no need hang around this guy anymore. He turned back towards the gate.

"Echizen!" His wrist was immediately caught in a firm grip. He frowned, and shook his arm, but it didn't loosen.

"Let go."

"It's dangerous to wander off on your own. You won't be able to fight if you get attacked by Noise." Tezuka said sternly.

"I don't understand any of this," he muttered, and jerked his arm free. "I'm leaving."

"Echizen! Listen! Do you want to run laps?" Tezuka asked in a warning voice.

Ryoma frowned, turning back around. "Laps? Why should I do what you say? Just because of some pact? You're in no position to order me around."

Tezuka opened his mouth as though to respond, then closed it again. Eventually... "You're right, of course."

Silence.

Ryoma stared. "....And?"

Tezuka turned away. "We're partners, now. We need to work together as a team to make it through the week," was the stiff response. "So... please don't go running off. It will make it dangerous for both of us."

Ryoma tugged down his cap, hiding a scowl. He wasn't very good at working with people. This didn't seem like a good sign.

Wait... a week?

'You have 7 days.'

First Day, End.

The Second Day

The Second Day

He opened his eyes and rolled his head to the side. His cheek scraped against concrete. He was lying on the footpath near the bus stop again.

Wait, what?

Ryoma sat up, then wavered briefly, having to blink several times to chase away the dizziness from waking up too quickly.

It was morning again?!

What had happened yesterday? The last thing he remembered was standing out the front of Seigaku with Tezuka...

Speaking of, Tezuka was sitting at the bus stop several metres away, staring at him with an unreadable expression on his face. Ryoma scowled. "You could have woken me sooner."

Tezuka looked away quickly, as though embarrassed to have been caught staring. "I only woke up a few minutes ago myself. And I did try."

Ryoma picked up his cap from the ground and dusted it off irritably. "What happened? We were in front of Seigaku..."

"I don't know either. But I believe it's the second day now. We should be getting a mission soon."

Almost on cue, both phones beeped. Tezuka's message alert was a single, low beep. For some reason, this annoyed Ryoma immensely - it was just so boring and typical. His so-called 'partner' must be the most straight-laced person on the planet.

'Erase The Golden Crow hiding amongst the yellow orbs. Time Limit: 5 hours.'

Ryoma stared at the phone. "The Golden Crow is one of those... Noise things, you think?" Come to think of, none of the people walking past the day before seemed to notice those weird 'Noise' - just him. What were they, anyway?

"Probably," Tezuka agreed. "I suppose now we have to go looking for yellow orbs." They both winced simultaneously as a sharp pain lanced through their arms. Ryoma unclenched his fist, and sure enough, the timer had returned.

"Hey... what happens when the timer runs out?"

"You'll be erased," Tezuka replied, slipping the phone back into his pocket. "You should have been paying attention."

"Attention to what ?" Ryoma grumbled.

"You don't remember them telling you?" Tezuka asked.

"Telling me what?! I don't understand anything that's going on here," Ryoma snapped.

Tezuka was quiet at that, and appeared pensive. Then Ryoma's stomach grumbled, breaking the silence.

"You're hungry?"

Embarrassed, Ryoma turned away. "Not really."

"... I suppose we have time. We should eat. I saw a restaurant with an emblem yesterday. Let's go there." Tezuka started in the direction of the shopping district.

Ryoma could see some Noise in the distance, so reluctantly kept pace. "An emblem?"

"So that the store owners can see us. I don't understand how it works, but I think it tunes our frequencies so that people in the RG can see us."

"RG?"

"Real Ground. We're in the UG, or Under Ground, right now. That's why no one else can see us, even though we can see them. The Noise are somewhere between the RG and the UG, so no one in the RG can see them either. Think of it like an astral plane."

It was a bit of an abstract concept to wrap his mind around, but Ryoma was willing to believe almost anything when weird frog creatures made people disappear and menacing timers appeared on his hand.

Still... "No one can see us?" That was why he'd been ignored the day before, he guessed. It didn't really make him feel any better about it.

"Only the Reapers and other Players. Here we are." Tezuka had brought them to what looked like a ramen store. There was a red skull and crossbones painted next to the door. The design vaguely resembled the black and white design on one of his pins.

"Are you sure we can afford the time?" Ryoma was hungry, sure, but all that talk of Noise and erasure sounded ominous. He wasn't sure if he wanted to risk not completing the mission.

"It should be fine. I have a pretty good idea where it might be," Tezuka assured him. They took a seat in one of the booths, and a server took their order. "Is there anything else you need to know?"

Ryoma frowned. "What's this stuff about seven days?"

"That's how long the Reaper's game is. If you complete the missions and avoid erasure for seven days, you win the game."

Ryoma was mildly impressed with how his so-called partner could tell him all these crazy outlandish things with a completely straight face. He had more questions - like who exactly the Reapers were, for example - but didn't want to appear completely clueless, so focused on his ramen as it arrived instead.

So... he was stuck in some weird game in a place called the UG where dangerous monsters known as Noise would try and kill him unless he partnered up with another player so that he could use pins with psychic powers to fight them off. It was rather headache inducing, but he thought he had the gist of it.

Although... "What's the deal with the pins?"

"That black and white one with the skull is your Player pin. You can use it to scan the area for Noise. It tends to pick up people's thoughts as well," Tezuka explained.

That was... rather impressive for a cheap bit of plastic and metal. Ryoma found himself suddenly glad that he hadn't tossed them in the bin the day before. "You can read people's minds with it?"

Tezuka's lips twitched, and it was obvious he didn't like the idea of it. "Except for Reapers or other players. It's mostly useful for finding dormant Noise. The other pins can help you activate psychs, so long as you have a pact. You'll probably find you're better with some psychs than others." He fished around in his pocket for a minute, and placed a couple of pins on the table. "I tested them earlier. Here, these are the pins I can't use. Perhaps you'll have better luck with them. You should have some too."

Ryoma brought out his own stash. He still had the fiery looking one he'd killed the frogs with, and carefully returned that to his pocket, but had no idea what the rest would do. Ramen finished; he placed his chopsticks back on the table with a dull clack. "Hey, let's go test these."

"Now?"

"When else? We should find out what they do before we go take care of that Golden thing."

Tezuka couldn't argue with that, so they went and found some more frog Noise to practice on. Now that he had an idea of what was going on, they weren't so scary, and so he felt perfectly okay trying out the pins one after another.

There was a healing one that he was mediocre at, and another one that looked a bit like a star that he had no idea about. They both apparently had no trouble with the psychokinesis ones, but Ryoma found himself most adept with the fire one. There was one that sent out bolts of lightning that he could grow to like, as well as another that created whirlwinds. All in all, he was pretty satisfied with the results.

"You're quite good at psychs. I met another pair of players before you yesterday, and they could only manage psychokinesis," Tezuka observed.

"Che, you're not so bad yourself," Ryoma admitted sourly. Tezuka had a weird psych that would suck the Noise into black holes, as well as another one that seemed to drop little meteors on them. "If all they can do is psychokinesis, they're in for a rough time."

Tezuka didn't comment on that, but Ryoma took his silence as agreement. "Heh, guess I lucked out with my partner then." If he was going to be stuck with someone, at least it was someone useful. It could have been worse. It could have been some annoying girl with long hair who talked his ear off or something. "So where're these golden orbs, then?"

"This way." Tezuka led the way at a sedate pace through the streets. Ryoma followed several steps behind, watching curiously as people passed them without a glance. It was weird to think that none of these people could see them.

Experimentally, he clutched his Player pin. It felt like his senses were expanding, and snatches of sound buzzed in his ears.

"I'd better remember to tape that show tonight - after missing last week..."

"I shouldn't have worn these shoes, my feet are killing me. Maybe I should just buy new ones."

"If x equals y to the power of 2, and then a equals... argh, I'm never going to pass! I should just become an actor or something."

Surprisingly, it appeared that most people thought of terribly mundane things most of the time. Ryoma turned his attention forward. Huh, he wasn't getting anything from Tezuka. Because he was a player, he guessed. How boring.

"Stop that," Tezuka ordered, glancing back. "It's a needless invasion of people's privacy."

"Just checking for Noise," he replied sullenly, releasing the pin. It was sort of neat, but he didn't really want to know those sorts of details about strangers.

Tezuka made a sound that seemed disapproving in the back of his throat, then turned back around. "We're here."

Ryoma blinked, leaning to look around Tezuka's tall frame. "Street tennis courts?" There was a repetitive thwack of tennis balls against racquets as kids and teenagers rallied on the open courts in front of them. Yellow orbs... that was a bit too poetic for a tennis ball. "So... what now?"

"Scan for Noise."

Ryoma rolled his eyes. "So now it's okay to scan?" Tezuka sent him a reproachful glance, and grumbling, he obediently clutched the

Player pin again. Honestly, useful or not, why did he have to pair up with such a stiff board?

They walked around the courts for a few minutes while Ryoma scanned. Eventually, he stopped in his tracks. "There's something weird about that one," he reported, pointing to a ball lying off in the grass. Tezuka picked it up, gripping the ball in a manner that looked as though he were familiar with it.

"The Noise must be inside." He squeezed the ball lightly. Ryoma squinted.

"It looked like it shifted a little. Maybe if you hit it really hard, it will come out?" he suggested.

Tezuka picked up a discarded racquet, threw the ball in the air, and slammed it with an impressive force that left Ryoma wide-eyed. With an ear-splitting screech, a golden bird-like Noise shot into the sky. The fight was on.

Or rather, the fight was *short*. With both of them armed with a much wider array of psychs, it didn't take that long to dispose of the Noise at all. As it blurred from existence, Ryoma glanced at his palm.

"Timer's gone. That was easy." If all of the missions were this simple, the game would be a breeze.

"Hn. Let's not get careless." Tezuka was picking through the grass. "It dropped some pins," he reported, collecting several small metal discs off the grass. "They might be useful."

Ryoma was staring at his hand still. "Hey, you know... what do we get if we win the game?"

There was a long silence at that - so long, in fact, that Ryoma turned and looked for his partner.

Tezuka adjusted his glasses. When he spoke, his voice was uncharacteristically soft.

"... A second chance."

Second Day, End.

The Third Day

The Third Day

A gritty substance prickled his cheek, and footsteps thudded near his head. Blearily, Ryoma opened his eyes.

The bus stop again ?

Wait... they'd been at the street courts just a moment ago! Was it the third day already?!

Ryoma sat up, hand reaching for his cap and tugging it on over his head. Somewhat annoyingly, Tezuka was already awake, sitting on the bench nearby with that unreadable expression on his face again. Ryoma didn't bother greeting him. He'd only known the guy for two days, but the looks Tezuka gave him sort of unnerved him sometimes - it was as though Tezuka was seeing someone else, or expecting him to do something that he never did.

They were only awake a few minutes before their phones beeped. This time Tezuka's let out a descending trill, eliciting a frown from the stern-faced teen.

"You changed it?"

Ryoma nonchalantly flipped open his own phone. "It was boring."

He was expecting Tezuka to be annoyed, but if anything he seemed mildly amused and didn't even ask when Ryoma had the opportunity to mess with the phone's settings. They read the mission mail.

"Win a tennis match in the Under 18s without losing a point. Time Limit: 6 hours. Fail, and face erasure."

"Tennis again?" Ryoma frowned. "Who issues these messages, anyway?"

"The Game Master."

"Who's that?"

"I don't know." Tezuka slid his phone back into his pocket, looking around. "But I dare say we'll find out before the week is out."

"So..."

"It must be a competition in the indoor complex. We won't be able to play outside," Tezuka surmised.

"There's an indoor tennis complex?" Ryoma scrambled to keep up.

"Yes. It's expensive, but it means you can play through Winter."

"Hey, where will we get the money? I spent everything I had on ramen yesterday."

He hadn't been paying attention to where he was going, so didn't notice Tezuka stop. Thus it was quite a shock to suddenly run into what felt like an invisible wall. It stung like a powerful electric zap, and he stumbled back, Tezuka gently catching and steadying him.

"What-?"

"A wall."

"Obviously," Ryoma muttered under his breath.

"It's already a long walk to the complex. This is the shortest way."

Sighing, Ryoma stepped away from the invisible barrier, looking for some means around it. It was sort of irritating to watch people in the RG walk freely down the footpath while they were stuck there.

Eventually his gaze landed on a plain-looking guy dressed in a school uniform nearby who seemed to be watching them. Ryoma thought he remembered seeing something similar before. Curious, he clutched his Player pin. Nothing. "Hey, there's some strange guy

over there. I can't scan him." Looking closer, he seemed to be sporting a pair of black, skeletal wings. Their curvy, sharp shape sort of reminded him of the Noise. Cosplay?

It caught Tezuka's attention immediately. "A Reaper."

"The guys running the game?" He grabbed a pin. "Will he try to erase us?"

"I don't think so." Tezuka strode towards him. Ryoma followed cautiously.

Once they were only a few steps away the Reaper straightened up. "Players, huh? You want to pass the wall, you have to clear all the Noise in this area."

Ryoma did a quick scan and nearly groaned. "There's a dozen of them!"

"Then you'd better get to it." He sounded bored, and folded his arms as he leant back leisurely against the wall.

Ryoma growled low in his throat, but Tezuka's hand on his shoulder stilled him. "Not all of the missions can be easy. There were bound to be obstacles."

"As though the mission isn't hard enough by itself?" he complained.

"The stakes are erasure," Tezuka pointed out.

"Che. Whatever." He headed over to the nearest Noise.

The Noise were easy to dispatch - a minute or so of fire or lightning and a few hits from Tezuka got rid of most of them, but it was still time consuming getting through them all. Ryoma cast an anxious glance at his hand after they erased the last one. They'd wasted an hour just to get past a stupid invisible wall!

"Objective met," the Reaper drawled. "Wall cleared." Duties apparently done, he skulked away. This time when they walked down the path nothing impeded their way. Ryoma occupied himself by rifling through the pins that had dropped from some of Noise they'd fought. He was rather drawn to one with a sword on it, but the others felt like junk.

"Hey, what can we do with these- Oof!" He nearly dropped the pin he'd been holding up when he ran into *another* invisible barrier.

Tezuka frowned, holding out a hand experimentally and retracting it swiftly when it zapped him. Looking around, he located a Reaper. "Echizen, over here."

"Not again," he muttered, scowling, then pinned the plain-looking Reaper with a glare. Why did they all wear school uniforms? "What is it this time?"

"Bring me a yellow pin. Doesn't matter which kind. You can get them from the Noise," the Reaper said.

Ryoma held out an obnoxious-looking pin with some weird squiggles on it. "Will this do?"

"You've already got one? I'm kind of impressed." The Reaper all but snatched the pin from his grasp. "Hey, if you have any more pins, I'll buy them from you. The only way to get these is by erasing Noise, and we're not supposed to really do that."

Five minutes later they were on their way again. "It's good thing those Wall Reapers will buy those pins the Noise drop," Ryoma commented. They'd sold all of their duds and duplicates.

"Hopefully it will be enough to cover equipment hire and the tournament entry fee," Tezuka agreed. "We're here." Sure enough, the emblem was painted on the wall.

They'd been walking for ages. Ryoma cast a nervous glance at his hand. They had less than three hours to finish the mission. How long did a tennis match normally take? "Hey, what happens if someone from the RG interferes?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm willing to bet that the Reapers will find a way to solve it." Tezuka nodded towards the side where one of the indistinct students leant against the wall. He'd just be a spectator to anybody else, but the two Players could see the skeletal wings protruding from his back clearly. Now that he was looking for them, it seemed like those Reapers were everywhere. With a sigh, Ryoma turned his eyes back to the complex. There were a couple of people clustered around a desk, and a poster hanging above it. The competition, he guessed.

"Everyone here's a lot older than us," he observed.

"But it's a small, local tournament for amateurs. The standard of play won't be very high. Would you like to enter too?"

"Won't it increase our chances? That way, if we wind up against each other, one of us can just throw the game," Ryoma pointed out pragmatically. It was the only way he could envision them completing the mission.

Tezuka stopped, as though a thought had just occurred to him. "Can you... can you play tennis?" he asked hesitantly.

"I know the rules," he said huffily. "But there's no way I'd be able to win a game without losing a single point. Don't you lose points from missing serves?"

Tezuka had that strange expression again. "... Don't worry, I can take care of it."

"Heh, you think you're pretty good, then?"

"As someone I know might say, 'mada mada dane'."

Ryoma blinked. "So... you're not?"

Tezuka sighed, and rested his hand briefly on his head. "It should be fine."

Ryoma scowled and swatted the hand away. "Stop treating me like I'm a kid. You're not that much older than me."

"My apologies; that wasn't my intention." Tezuka headed over to the table, rented out a pair of racquets and entered them into the tournament. He came back over and handed a racquet to Ryoma. "We're unseeded, so we'll be in the first round."

"Good. We've got less than three hours. We just have to win one match without losing a point, right?"

Tezuka nodded.

Ryoma had his own match so was unable to watch Tezuka play. His opponent looked like he was in high school, and the racquet felt heavy in his hand. Something about it made him feel hollow and uneasy. He'd been sceptical about the whole thing to begin with, but when he threw a ball into the air, and completely missed on the swing, he knew they were in trouble.

Things only got worse from there.

Half an hour later, Ryoma trailed from the court, thoroughly embarrassed. Partway through, he'd managed to sort of get the hang of serving, but half of the balls he hit were out, and most returns he missed altogether. Irritably, he swung the racquet a few times. It was odd. Why was it so difficult? His body felt like it should know the movements, but it was hard to make it move the way it was supposed to.

Either way, he was out. So much for their plan of matching up and throwing the game. He sought out Tezuka, who was on the opposite

side of the complex. He was just finishing up when he arrived. "Hey, how did it go?"

"I won," Tezuka replied simply.

Ryoma glanced at his hand. The timer was still there. "Lost some points?"

"Two service aces. The speed caught me by surprise."

He just lost two points? That was surprisingly good, but then, the standard would only rise as they progressed through the stages of the tournament. "Che."

"How did you go?" Tezuka asked.

Ryoma frowned, and handed the racquet back over. "Tennis isn't much fun." The match had left him feeling sort of drained. It was good that Tezuka was skilled at it, but Ryoma didn't see the appeal. "Lost every point. Couldn't get the hang of it."

Tezuka's expression looked oddly strained. "... It's not for everyone, I suppose."

Ryoma scanned the hall briefly. The Reaper hadn't left his position. He was probably monitoring to make sure the mission was fulfilled correctly. "Hey... Couldn't we just use psychokinesis?"

Dark brown eyes turned to him. "You're suggesting we cheat?" The disapproval was evident in Tezuka's voice.

Feeling uncomfortable, Ryoma jerked his head in the direction of a girl and a guy, both about high school age and wearing Player Pins. There were probably others who hadn't found their way there yet, too. "Look, even if you're really good at tennis, this isn't about tennis, right? This is about the game. I doubt either of those two over there can play well enough not to lose a single point... isn't the point that we find a way around it?"

"We won't need to cheat," Tezuka said confidently. Ryoma wished he could share that confidence.

He folded his arms and looked away. "Che."

Tezuka might have been confident, but Ryoma had no assurance whatsoever as the timer continued ticking down on his palm. They had to wait for all the other matches to finish before Tezuka could play again. He watched the other two players try their hand at it - they lost several points right from the get go, but they were putting up a good fight in hopes of having a second chance. He just wished they'd hurry up - time was running out.

With an hour and fifteen minutes left, Tezuka took the court again. Ryoma settled on the sidelines, along with a decent collection of other people. With a quick scan, he could hear their thoughts - apparently Tezuka's previous match had been rather impressive, if the speculation he was picking up on was any indication.

He clutched a pin in his pocket. Tezuka was intent on doing the mission properly, but if it looked like a ball was going to go out, he'd intervene anyway. They couldn't risk erasure.

"One set match, Ryuuzaki versus Shinohara, Ryuuzaki service play!" the umpire announced.

Tezuka moved to the service line. Ryoma was confused. He was using a fake name?

Tezuka threw the ball up into the air, arced his back, and then smashed the ball across the net.

"... Fif-fifteen-love!" the umpire stammered.

Tezuka bounced the ball once, threw it into the air, and swung again. The ball rocketed across the court. Once again, his wide-eyed opponent didn't even touch it.

"Thirty-love!"

Throw. Bend. Smash.

"F-forty-love!"

It was Tezuka's game. Ryoma was almost as wide-eyed as Tezuka's opponent. He hadn't thought his partner was *that* good.

Maybe he wouldn't need to use psychs after all.

The receiving game wasn't much better, though it was a great deal more nerve-racking. The serve looked positively snail-paced compared to his opponent's, and Tezuka had no trouble reaching each of the balls. Every shot he hit was into the sides or corners, sometimes so close to the line that Ryoma's breath caught in his throat. Tezuka didn't look worried though, so he forced himself to relax.

Four points later, and it was Tezuka's service again. Four no-touch aces, and then Tezuka was receiving again.

In the fourth game, his opponent obviously started to pull himself together, and actually managed to start some rallies. Tezuka returned each ball without fail. On the second breakpoint Shinohara hit to the far left, right down the line, but to Ryoma's amazement - and that of the spectators - the ball seemed to *curve*, spinning back towards Tezuka who easily put it away with a backhand.

Snatches of thoughts encroached the edges of his awareness.
"Such spin control... I'd heard about some kid that could do that, but..."

"Shinohara doesn't have a chance. Oh man, does this mean I'm going to have to play this guy next?"

Startled, Ryoma relaxed his grip on the Player pin - he hadn't even been aware of how tightly he'd been holding it. Watching Tezuka play

tennis... it was amazing, it really was, but it made him feel odd. Jealous, maybe, but it was dark, twisted sort of emotion that didn't make any sense since he didn't even care about tennis anyway.

Point after point fell to Tezuka. His opponent was visibly aggravated, but seemed to be giving up as no matter where he hit the ball it would curve back into towards Tezuka's racket as though attracted by a magnetic force. Dark brown eyes tracked every ball unerringly, muscles coiling and stretching with each return. Ryoma was almost hypnotised.

Twenty-four points later, a pale-faced umpire called the game. "Game, set and match won by Ryuuzaki!" There was a wave of excited murmurs from the spectators.

Ryoma glanced at his hand. The timer was gone. Fifty minutes to spare. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the other two players exclaim in relief. It looked like only one pair had to finish the mission for all of the players to be off the hook then - that was useful to know. Not that Ryoma would risk relying on other people. He was pretty sure Tezuka wouldn't stand for it anyway.

Tezuka rolled his left arm a few times and headed to the net. "Thank you for the game. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to forfeit the remaining matches." He shook his opponent's hand and bowed to both the umpire and the organisers. He hadn't even worked up a sweat. As they protested, he headed back over to his partner.

"You *did* use psychokinesis," Ryoma accused in a low voice. "I saw the way that ball moved!"

"I wasn't using a psych," Tezuka replied calmly as he returned their racquets.

Whatever. "Hey... why did you use a fake name?"

"I thought it might cause problems if I didn't. There was a risk of seeing someone from the RG as it was."

"And why would that be a problem?" Ryoma asked, puzzled.

"You don't think it would be a problem if people suddenly started playing tennis against someone who was supposed to be dead?" Tezuka bent down to tighten the laces on his shoes. When Ryoma didn't respond, he glanced up. "... Echizen?"

It felt as though the world had stopped. "... You're... you're dead?"

Tezuka seemed puzzled. "Of course. All of the Players are."

"What... I'm... I'm dead too?" he choked out, a little disbelieving.

Tezuka gave him a sideways glance. "You didn't even know that much?"

"I don't... I don't remember anything," he finished lamely.

"Nothing at all?" Tezuka didn't sound very surprised. He was starting to wonder if anything would phase the teen.

Frustrated, Ryoma tugged down his cap. It was embarrassing to admit it, but it wasn't something he'd thought about. "My name, but that's it."

"And you didn't think that was odd?"

"I didn't know any different, did I?" he grumbled. It wasn't until he'd been prompted to try and recall something specific - such as being alive - that he realised that he knew next to nothing at all. He never even had the chance to question it - as soon as he'd awoken, things happened one after another at a breakneck speed.

Tezuka had that pensive look again. "I suppose that explains why you didn't know anything about the game. You forgot the briefing."

Ryoma rubbed at his head. This was annoying. He couldn't believe it. He was really dead?

Thinking about it, it did make sense. Why people in the RG couldn't see them, and all those weird abilities, the Reapers themselves, and Tezuka's comment the day before. "So the game..."

"All players enter the game for the same reason. We're playing to get a second chance at life," Tezuka confirmed.

Third Day, End.

The Fourth Day

The Fourth Day

Ryoma bolted upright, looking about wildly. The sharp thud of tennis balls echoed in the background. Where...?

The street courts this time, by the looks of it. It was a nice change waking up on grass as opposed to the unforgiving concrete of the footpath. Ryoma glanced around getting his bearings, before finding Tezuka still sprawled out on the ground sleeping on his stomach. For the first time it looked like he'd woken up before his partner.

Ryoma crouched down next to the prone form, tilting his head as he inspected the other boy. The almost permanent frown Tezuka wore while awake was smoothed in slumber. It made his face look a lot softer.

He obviously couldn't remember how he'd died, but how did Tezuka die? He was burning with curiosity, but it seemed like a sort of personal question to ask someone he'd only known for four days. Funny. He never considered death like that before.

... Not that he would remember if he had.

Tezuka stirred, eyelids fluttering briefly. He pushed himself up off the ground with a barely audible groan, Ryoma looking on in amusement. His hair was mussed and his glasses were skew. It was sort of nice to see his unflappable partner looking human. With his own memory missing, it rather irked him that he needed to rely on Tezuka for so much. It stung at his pride to admit that if the elder boy hadn't insisting on making the pact, Ryoma wouldn't have made it past the first day. He wouldn't have even considered *looking* for a partner to pact with.

"Echizen. Good morning," Tezuka greeted him levelly. Then... "The street courts?"

"Heh. A change of scenery is nice, isn't it?" Ryoma drawled.
"Wonder if it means anything."

"The mission?"

"Haven't received one yet."

No sooner than the words had left his mouth did their phones beep. Ryoma bit back a groan and fished his mobile from his pocket.

"Sell twenty packs of Fila wristbands. Time limit: Eight hours. Hint: Check your phone."

"What's with the tennis obsession in all of these missions?" he groused.

"You'd rather erase Noise?" Tezuka asked.

"The Wall Reapers will make us do that anyway," he grumbled.

Tezuka's lips quirked in what could have been a smile, but Ryoma probably just imagined it. "There's only one store I know of nearby that sells Fila wristbands."

"Okay. Let's get it over with then." It was a good thing that Tezuka seemed to know his way around the area. Ryoma wouldn't have even known where to start.

"The ramen store is on the way. We should eat, as well."

"Do we have any money?" He didn't really feel like killing Noise and then trying to sell pins to Wall Reapers on an empty stomach.

"It should be enough."

Given that they had a whole eight hours this time, Ryoma ate his ramen leisurely. And they still had seven whole hours when they entered the sports shop.

It didn't take long to locate the Fila wristbands. Ryoma counted them. There were exactly twenty on the shelf. They must have been the first players there. "So, we just have to sell all these, right? Can't we just buy them ourselves?"

Tezuka checked his pockets. "We only have enough money left to buy three."

"Let's get those now, then go kill some Noise to get some pins and come back for the rest," Ryoma suggested. Though the thought of having to collect pins and go sell them to the creepy Wall Reapers wasn't a pleasant one. As his hand reached for the wristbands, though, a thought occurred to him. "Hey... did this shop have an emblem?"

They exchanged a glance, and then without a word checked outside.

No emblem. Nothing to tune their frequencies so that they could interact with the RG.

"How are we supposed to buy wristbands when we can't even be seen in this store?" Ryoma complained.

"It just said to sell them - not that we had to buy them. Maybe we're supposed to get other people to buy them," Tezuka suggested.

"And how are we supposed to do that?!"

Tezuka didn't have an answer for that. He appeared deep in thought. "Maybe it's the wrong store. There's another one... it's about an hour's walk away."

Ryoma bit back a groan at the thought. Figured. Eight hours was way too long for so simple a mission. There'd probably be a dozen

walls to clear on the way, too.

They started walking. Surprisingly, they had to have been walking for a good half an hour before Ryoma finally slammed face-first into a wall, tripping backwards and landing on his backside. He swore, and Tezuka gave him a reproachful look.

"So where's the Reaper, then?" he growled.

Tezuka was looking around, but froze suddenly. Ryoma leant around him to see, and spotted a Wall Reaper sloppily dressed in a school uniform - though this one's hair was long and his skin more tan than the others. "Right, let's go see what dumb errand it is this time. Hey you!"

This Wall Reaper reacted a little differently when he saw them. And by 'a little differently', he meant that he went bug-eyed and nearly fell over. "What?! You're kidding me!"

"Hey," Ryoma said. "Tell us what we have to do to get past the wall."

"You're players?! Seriously, you're both players?!"

"I'm rather surprised to discover you're a Reaper," Tezuka said.

The Wall Reaper looked uncomfortable at that. "Yeah. Two years ago. Hit my head diving into the pool and drowned."

"That's sort of lame," Ryoma mumbled.

"Shut up! It wasn't like I did it on purpose! I made it into the game, but didn't do too well. So I asked to become a Reaper."

"That's how you become a Reaper? You just ask?" Why didn't everybody choose to become Reapers, then? From the sounds of it, they got to lead lives in the RG *and* the UG, and didn't even have to complete the game without getting erased to do it.

"Well, yeah, but not all the Reapers last you know! We've got to do stuff to survive just like the Players do!" the Reaper snapped. "I'm a Support Reaper so that means I've got to do things like stand around setting up walls and stuff, but it's better than gaining lifespan the same way as the Harriers."

There was a lot of terminology in there that Ryoma wanted to ask about, but Tezuka cut in before he could speak. "My condolences," Tezuka stated. "Echizen, this is Arai. Arai, Echizen."

"Hey, you know—" Arai started to say, but Tezuka raised an eyebrow, and his mouth formed into an 'o'. "Oh. I get it. Still... Tezuka-buchou and Echizen? I mean, I knew there was a pretty good chance, but..." Arai rubbed his head. "I can't cut you any slack just because I knew you in the RG."

"I'm sorry," Ryoma interrupted, though he wasn't sorry at all. "Who were you again?"

"Hey, that's a bit—" he faltered when Tezuka shook his head slightly. "Ah, crap!" Arai seemed to have a bit of a temper, though was visibly restraining it every time he looked in Tezuka's direction. "This is all so messed up!"

Seeing as he wasn't about to get anything out of the Reaper, Ryoma turned his attention to his partner instead. "Knew him in the RG?" he guessed.

"He was a member of my tennis club."

What was *with* these people and tennis? He didn't see the appeal. "So, about the wall?" he asked impatiently.

"Huh? Oh, the wall? I can't lower that one. The game doesn't go outside of the ward. Don't even try."

"The Game has boundaries?" Tezuka asked, looking pensive.

"Sure. All the games do. This one stretches from here, to just past the street courts, to the shrine past the shopping complex, then just north of the river. Seigaku's pretty close to the centre of it."

Ryoma looked into the distance. He could clearly see skyscrapers in the distance - it was weird to think that he couldn't go there. Even though they were standing outside on an open street, he suddenly felt claustrophobic. "Then what about the mission?!"

Arai hesitated. "Look, hey... I can't just be giving out hints, but if you clear a task, then maybe..."

"You can do that?" Tezuka asked.

Arai folded his arms and looked away. "It's not exactly against the rules... I normally wouldn't but... well, they're supposed to explain these things to the Players. I figure if they haven't, this is what we're supposed to do. It's not 'cause I knew you or anything!"

It was a little weird to hear Arai referring to Tezuka in the past tense when he was standing right there. Either way, Ryoma thought it only fair that if this Wall Reaper knew his partner while he was alive that he extend them some extra courtesy. "So, what do you want?"

Clearly put on the spot, Arai looked around. His eyes lit up. "How about you get rid of that Noise possessing my classmate over there? It's been annoying me for days."

Ryoma turned and scanned, quickly zoning in on a spiky-haired guy sitting on a bench, staring into the distance and looking perfectly miserable. A rather hyper-looking Noise was buzzing around him.

"If only I'd gone for burgers... then at least maybe one of them..."

"Ah, Momoshiro," Tezuka said.

"... Another member of your tennis club?" Ryoma hazarded.

"... Yes."

"Huh, think he's all depressed over your death?"

"More likely..." Tezuka stopped and turned to Arai. "Noise can possess people too?"

"Not possess exactly, but it's sort of a... you know, they can make them really depressed and negative. Noise are drawn to negative emotions, but also create a bad vibe... sort of like some sort of loop thing..."

"A cyclic dilemma," Tezuka supplied.

"Right. Hey, I knew it!" he protested hotly when Ryoma deadpanned.

"Right. So, we clear the Noise away from him, he cheers up, and you'll tell us about the mission?" he confirmed. Sometimes he was tempted to get these agreements from the Wall Reapers in writing. Arai in particular didn't seem like the trustworthiest sort. Ryoma wouldn't put it past him to add extra details to the deal on whim, or neglect to tell them something.

"Yeah. Not cause I care or anything! Just that it's annoying." Arai grumbled.

"Heeee," Ryoma drawled, lips curving upwards condescendingly.

"Shut up! Just do it already!" Arai demanded, making a fist, and then hesitantly unclenching it at Tezuka's stern stare.

"Echizen, let's go."

Ryoma trailed after his partner, heading over towards where that guy Momoshiro was sitting. "He called you 'Tezuka-buchou'. Does that mean you were the captain of the tennis club?"

Tezuka nodded. Ryoma smirked. "Heh." No surprise. Tezuka struck him as a leader-type, and his tennis *had* been pretty impressive, even to someone who didn't know anything about the sport.

"Let's just get rid of the Noise," Tezuka said tiredly.

It was a simple enough matter - once Tezuka disappeared into the other zone so that they could fight the Noise properly, Ryoma clutched his fire pin tightly, concentrating on the ground beneath the angry frog Noise. Flames rose in twisting pillars. He was vaguely aware of Tezuka doing something, but the psych would fail if he lost concentration. After a moment, the Noise fuzzed and evaporated from existence, only a small pin dropping to the ground to signify it ever existed.

Amazingly, once the Noise had been erased, Momoshiro perked up almost immediately. Curious, Ryoma clutched his Player Pin for another scan.

"What am I doing? I can't undo it. I shouldn't just mope here! I should... I should do something in his memory or something! Yeah! Maybe..."

He was out of scanning range relatively quickly, loping away with a long-legged stride. Ryoma watched him go. "Heh, your club members really cared about you Tezuka."

Tezuka started a little at his name, but didn't comment. He had that strange look on his face again.

They headed back over to Arai. "So?" Ryoma asked impatiently.

"Hey, don't take that tone with me you brat, you're just-" Arai faltered again when Tezuka stepped up next to Ryoma, and changed the subject. "Fine. So you know how you can scan people? If you write a message into your phones while you're scanning someone, you can imprint them too."

"Imprint?" Tezuka asked.

"It's like giving their thoughts a nudge. Just having a word or idea pop into their head. It has to have context, but you know... like if

they're trying to decide between chocolate or vanilla ice-cream, you could imprint them with a flavour to choose."

"I see..." Tezuka looked like vaguely disturbed by the notion.

"Is there *anything* this piece of painted metal can't do?" Ryoma asked, only half sarcastic.

Tezuka held up his own Player pin thoughtfully and examined it. Eventually, he refastened it to his shirt. "Thank you."

"Hey, you know... good luck," Arai mumbled, sort of begrudgingly. "Club's been sort of... just, you'd better win! You'll be letting Seigaku down otherwise!" His piece said the Reaper stalked away, hands shoved in his pockets and kicking at a stray can angrily.

Ryoma smirked. "Heh. You've got weird people in your club, Tezuka."

"... So I've been told."

"Guess we're supposed to imprint people to get them to buy those wristbands then," Ryoma mused, sighing and shuffling his feet some.

"... It doesn't seem right," Tezuka said quietly. "Scanning is already invading their privacy, but to influence their thoughts..." He clearly had some moral dilemmas over their current mission.

Ryoma scoffed. "How else are we supposed to do it? Not like we can just go talk to them normally or anything."

"There should be a way."

Ryoma tugged his cap down over his eyes. "If you think of one, then let me know. Until then..."

This time, it was Ryoma that started walking through the streets, and Tezuka who followed. Memory or not, he was starting to get the hang

of this game stuff, and just because Tezuka was captain of some tennis club didn't make him captain of Ryoma.

Golden eyes flitted from side to side as he walked, looking for susceptible targets for imprinting. Since Tezuka didn't really like scanning, it was mostly up to him. Sportspeople would be the easiest, he reasoned, since busy housewives and businessmen on lunch break wouldn't have much need to go buy Fila wristbands, and the imprint would probably do nothing.

They passed the street courts. Ryoma's gait slowed as he scanned more intensely. Maybe he ought to try imprinting a few people there. There was a guy with slightly curly black hair and terrible fashion sense hanging out with another guy with a small cross-shaped scar on forehead. He clutched the Player Pin, focusing on the black-haired guy.

"And then, to assure our victory, I could... what would be the most efficient course of action be?"

Fingers darted across the phone keypad. *'Fila wristbands.'*

"... Fila wristbands, maybe? We could unsettle our opponents with the display of our team morale... but that particular brand doesn't have my colour, and it's proven that-" The thoughts started wandering off into another direction, and Ryoma nearly groaned. So close! Maybe imprinting wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Perhaps mass imprinting was the way to go. If he just imprinted randomly, he was sure to get a few people to buy them. That was the way advertising worked, right? And that was all this really was: subliminal advertising.

There was a girl with a round face and reddish pigtails looking a bit melancholic over on the benches, though you got the impression that this was a rare thing. Ryoma clutched the Player pin again.

"Now that he's gone... No, no, I've got to keep up a cheery face! I've got to keep it together, and unravel the mystery, and... but what can I really do? As leader of the fan club, I have to do something..."

Ryoma pressed the send button on his phone again.

"... Fila wristbands?... That's right! We can prove our everlasting devotion with memorabilia! One for everyone in the club, and then one each for the memorial, then..." She stood up abruptly, expression determined, and started walking in the direction of the sports shop.

That... was slightly weird. Ryoma didn't quite get it, but it seemed to have worked so he wasn't about to complain. Tezuka still had that look of disapproval on his face, but didn't say anything. The mission was paramount, after all.

Ryoma tried imprinting various other people on the courts but not too many took the bait. A great majority wondered why they even thought of the product at all, especially when they already had a brand new wristband, or didn't usually wear them, or on the odd occasion Ryoma wound up with a passer-by who didn't even play tennis at all.

Tezuka looked at his hand. "Two hours left. Should we check the store?"

Ryoma spied that spiky-haired guy they'd de-possessed earlier - what was his name again? - entering the street courts with a racquet bag on his back. "Just one more."

"I... I can start by making sure we don't lose that tournament. Yeah! Although... I should maybe do something extra. Like some sort of... I don't know... damn, this thinking is making me hungry."

'Fila wristbands.' Ryoma hoped that he didn't decide he wanted to eat Fila wristbands, but if it helped sell them, he didn't much care.

"Fila wristbands... yeah, that's it! A wristband... it'll be like a lucky charm! It'll show who I'm playing it for! Then I can't possibly lose! Crap, the store is gonna close soon, I'd better go right now!"

"All done?" Tezuka asked.

Ryoma slipped his phone back into his pocket. "Yeah. Let's go." Hopefully some of the other players had caught on to the imprinting thing too - Ryoma estimated that he'd only managed to get about six people to decide to go buy a wristband, and wasn't sure how many of them would actually follow through.

The sports shop was about fifteen minutes walk away a brisk pace. They entered and headed over to the wristbands. The spiky-haired guy - Momoshiro, that was it - was already there of course, and it looked like the girl with the pigtails was there too. It appeared that only half of the wristbands had sold, but to Ryoma's relief the girl was gathering up several.

"Hey, you're going to buy all of those?!" Momoshiro exclaimed, looking alarmed.

She sniffed. "Of course I am! To prove my everlasting love! In fact, this isn't even enough!"

Momoshiro grabbed at two of the wristbands before she could snatch those up too. "Hey, no, I need this more! He was my best friend you know!"

"But I was the leader of his fanclub!" She grabbed at another one.

"I used to give him rides to school!" Momoshiro snapped, snatching up another one.

"I watched all of his games and practices whenever I could!" Another wristband grabbed.

"I was actually *in* those games and practices!"

They suddenly stopped. They'd grabbed all of the remainder of the wristbands, and their expressions seemed to flatten. Ryoma was a little worried that they'd both burst out crying at any moment and was suddenly grateful that he was invisible.

"We... we should go pay for these," the girl said quietly.

Momoshiro looked as though he was deflating. "... Yeah." They headed over to the cash register with their wristband loads.

As soon as the purchases were completed, the timer vanished from his palm. That was always a relief. He was already dead, but being erased... it seemed so final.

The two of them headed towards the door. At the exit, they paused and shared a glance.

"In his memory, right?!" the girl said, raising her fist.

Momoshiro smiled, and bumped the fist with his own. "Yeah." They headed outside, looking a little more cheerful.

Ryoma blinked, putting two and two together, and turned to his partner. "Were they arguing over who misses you more?"

Tezuka's expression didn't change. "I usually use Prince brand."

Fourth Day, End.

The Fifth Day

The Fifth Day

By now, Ryoma wasn't even surprised to suddenly discover himself waking up in some weird public place. They were on the grassy bank by the river this time.

He was a little bit surprised at how soft the ground was, though. He was almost tempted to try and go back to sleep.

When his fingers touched fabric, he rethought that decision. Rolling his head, Ryoma realised that he was actually sprawled across someone. Gaze travelling upward, he caught sight of a relaxed brow and a wisp of brown hair.

Ah, that would be Tezuka.

Tezuka was extraordinarily comfortable, but partners or not, Ryoma figured that he probably was the sort to protect his personal space rather zealously. For that matter Ryoma was too, but since Tezuka was the only person he really knew he was willing to make concessions. He rolled off onto the grass with a yawn, and instantly regretted it. The ground was cold and damp. Tezuka had been nice and warm.

How did they even get like that, though? Ryoma hadn't thought too deeply about what happened in that intervening time, but he never remembered falling asleep after completing a mission. It was probably some weird supernatural force. He couldn't picture Reapers wandering around putting the players to sleep then carting them off somewhere. It had to be automatic, but it was still a disturbing thought.

Then again, they were essentially just soul now, weren't they? It wasn't so hard to imagine that when the Game shut down for the day

it might shut down the Players too, and then maybe when it started up again it spat you back out in a random location. And since you were tied to your partner by the pact, you'd wind up in the same place. Ryoma contented himself with that explanation, even though there was no proof of it either way.

A moment later a slight frown appeared on his partner's face, and dark brown eyes fluttered open. Tezuka pushed himself up, took a moment to orientate himself, then very politely said, "Good morning."

Ryoma checked the sun. It looked closer to early afternoon, but he didn't bother pointing that out.

"The river?"

"You'd know better than me," he muttered in a surly undertone.

"Hm." Tezuka didn't have a chance to respond to that, as their phones both beeped simultaneously.

"Clear all the Noise from Seigaku Courts. Time limit, five hours," Ryoma read aloud, and then snapped his phone shut. Finally, a nice straightforward mission. Oh sure, there were probably half a dozen Wall Reapers to slow them down, but most of them were happy if they just defeated some summoned Noise or performed some dumb errand or answered a riddle, which Tezuka invariably figured out in a matter of seconds.

"Five hours... we'll eat quickly," Tezuka decided, then started walking away.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Seigaku is this way. The ramen place is on the way," he replied.

Ryoma scowled, and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Oh."

They hadn't even made it to the ramen shop before they ran into their first wall. Looking around, though, Ryoma couldn't see any Wall

Reapers. "This is just great," he grumbled.

Cackling laughter suddenly sounded from above them. It sent shivers down his spine. Tezuka was looking at the roof.

"Kirihsra?"

It was another Reaper, feet dangling over the edge of the rooftop. The guy's face stretched into a positively demonic grin. His hair was a curly mess, and his eyes were sort of bloodshot. "Ha! I can't believe this! You two are in the game? This is the best!" He slapped a hand over his eyes and rocked back and forth while he laughed.

He had those same black skeletal wings that the Wall Reaper Arai had, but the vibe he gave off was different. He was wearing a bright yellow shirt instead of the usual school uniform or plain black clothing most of the other Reapers favoured, just for starters.

"Who is this guy?" Ryoma asked.

"A tennis player from Rikkai," Tezuka answered.

"Hey, I'm much more than that!" he yelled down, standing and pointing rudely at them. "Pay a bit more respect to your Game Master!"

"Game Master?" Ryoma repeated, blinking.

"So you're the one who has been issuing the missions," Tezuka surmised.

"That's right!" Kirihsra giggled - but it somehow sounded more threatening than childish. "I thought I'd introduce myself to the surviving Players! And now it all makes sense. I didn't think anyone would complete the third mission, but now that I know you two are here..."

"Hey, why-" Ryoma started to say, but was interrupted when Kirihsra burst into a fit of manic laughter again.

"This is so rich! At last! I'll finally get you back! I can't wait until the seventh day! Then the Reapers can finally attack the Players directly, you know!" Kirihsara grinned, eyes wild.

That was news about the Reapers attacking them directly... "You mean they've been attacking indirectly?" Ryoma asked.

Kirihsara ignored his question. "There's not many of you left now. I run a tight game. But I want to take care of you two personally." He giggled again, looking positively giddy at the thought. "You'd better escape erasure until the last day!" He waved his hand. "There, the wall's gone. As thanks for making things *interesting* ." He ran off across the rooftop, and a moment later was out of sight.

The guy was clearly bonkers. "Does he have some sort of grudge against you?" Ryoma asked.

"My team defeated his in the National Tournament," Tezuka replied in a low voice.

Ah, tennis again. No wonder all the missions had been so heavily tennis-themed. "What a weirdo."

Tezuka seemed troubled by the revelation. "He's dangerous. Even in the RG, Kirihsara was always a bit aggressive."

Ryoma suspected that his partner was being polite and understating things again. Those bloodshot eyes made him uneasy. Not scared, because something as lame as bloodshot eyes just didn't scare Ryoma, but it still didn't sit right with him. He sidled a little closer to Tezuka without really noticing he was doing it, then frowned and stepped away again.

"We'd better get to Seigaku," Tezuka said eventually.

"Yeah."

They started walking.

They quickly ate some ramen, then resumed heading towards the school. They only encountered two walls on the way - for the first all they had to do was defeat some summoned Noise, then run back and fetch a bowl of ramen for the second one. They had a good two and a half hours to spare when they reached the school gates.

It was a good thing too, as it seemed like Seigaku's tennis court was *crawling* with Noise. Ryoma nearly dropped his Player pin in shock.

"That's going to take *forever* to clear," he hissed.

"Then we'd better get started," Tezuka said.

They started at the edges, clearing them away methodically one after another. They must have spent at least half an hour killing Noise. They were picking up a rather impressive collection of pins - they were going to be rich the next time they came across a Wall Reaper.

As a crow-like Noise vanished into the ether, Ryoma put his hands on his knees, struggling to catch his breath. Tezuka clutched his Player Pin and did a scan, then frowned. "It seems as though others keep turning up to replace the ones we've erased. We're not making any progress at all."

"Where are all the other Players, already?" Ryoma groused. It would be easier if they didn't have to clear them all themselves.

"There might have been more walls on the other paths," Tezuka pointed out. "In the meantime, we should figure what keeps bringing all these Noise here, or we'll never finish in time."

Ryoma's attention was caught by a scuffle over near what looked like the tennis court's clubroom. "Hey, what's happening over there?" There was a small group of students, and it looked like they were arguing.

Tezuka followed his gaze, and froze.

"Heartless Viper! I want them here too, but they're grieving!"

"Idiot! Do you think they'd want us to stop just like that?! That's disrespecting their wishes!"

"Hey, who are you saying is being disrespectful?! We'll just win without them! Or don't you think you can?!" It was Momoshiro, Ryoma recalled vaguely - the spiky-haired guy from the day before. He was wearing a Fila wristband.

"Are you looking for a fight?!"

"Nyaaa, Kaidoh, Momo, don't fight!" A redhead was tugging on Momoshiro's arm. "Fuji and Oishi will be back! They just need another day, I'm sure!"

"Correct," a really tall guy with thick glasses added, placing a hand on Kaidoh's shoulder. "There is a less than ten percent chance that confronting them over their absence will bring them back faster. And at the very least, there is a 90 percent chance that Fuji will be back at practice tomorrow on his own. He appears to have dealt with his grief better than Oishi has."

"Oishi," the redhead lamented sadly. "He won't even talk to me. We need to stick together now!"

"That's what I've been saying!" Both Momoshiro and Kaidoh snapped out at the same time, then glared at each other.

Tezuka was paying close attention to the exchange. "You know those people?" Ryoma asked, curious.

Tezuka stiffened slightly, then nodded briefly. "... in the RG."

It stood to reason then that they were all members of Tezuka's tennis club. Momoshiro and the guy wearing the bandanna seemed to be in particularly bad moods, fighting with each other despite apparently having the exact same opinion, while the other two were trying to

break them up. Ryoma clutched his Player Pin and did a quick scan. It looked like that Kaidoh had a Noise on him, and the others were perilously close to getting possessed themselves. It was probably what was attracting all the Noise.

"What do you think they're fighting about?" Obviously they were upset about some people not being there, but considering that their captain had just died, Ryoma didn't see the big deal.

"About practicing."

"For a tennis tournament, right?"

Tezuka turned to him. "How did you know?"

"We're on a tennis court, you're obviously good at a tennis, and if they're arguing about winning without people because they're grieving..."

Tezuka looked oddly disappointed. "... Right."

"... Do you want them to go?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you want them to go to the tournament?" Ryoma asked impatiently. "Even though... you know."

"Of course," Tezuka replied. "But I don't have any say in the matter. They'll have to sort it out themselves."

"We could find the others and imprint them," Ryoma suggested, holding up his phone and Player Pin.

Tezuka placed his hand on his wrist and lowered it. "No. It's meaningless if they don't play of their own volition."

Ryoma could sort of understand that, he guessed, but he hoped they sorted it out soon. "Whatever." In any case, he was willing to bet that

if they got rid of that Noise with a hold on Kaidoh, the Noise on the rest of the courts would thin out a little. "Let's go."

They went for the Noise. Tezuka vanished from his sight, but not from his senses. Long used to fighting in different zones, Ryoma focused on their enemy instead. This Noise was a new one - it looked a bit like a sea serpent, curled and floating in the air as though it were underwater.

No problem. Ryoma grabbed his cyclone pin and clutched it, concentrating. Whirlwinds started to form around the Noise. It twisted in the air, briefly confused by the turbulence, then suddenly shot straight for him like an arrow.

It was fast! Ryoma staggered back, hand clutching at his side. Blood seeped through his fingers. When did...

"Echizen?! Are you okay?" Tezuka's disembodied voice hung in the air.

"Fine," he ground out through gritted teeth, then let out a grunt when the Noise whipped into his back. Grabbing his lightning pin this time, he sent out a spray of lightning bolts that left the air crackling. The Noise shrieked and fled a short distance away. Ryoma kept a wary eye on it. It was quick, and most of his psychs took a second to activate, even though he'd been getting faster at it. He fished blindly for one new pin he hadn't used much, but required less concentration than the others. It bore the image of a katana. He clutched it between his fingers and waited, vision blurring in and out of focus. Dammit, it *hurt*, but if he didn't pay attention now he'd get erased, and where would that leave Tezuka?

The Noise dashed for him again. This time Ryoma was ready and slashed at the air. An almost invisible blade formed around the fingers clutching the pin, and the Noise shrilled in pain and wheeled away. Gasping for breath, he shifted position again, shoes smudging the blood dripping on to the ground. Dammit, this was the first time a

Noise had actually drawn blood from him - the worst the frogs ever did was leave some grazes.

Suddenly, the Noise vanished. Tezuka must have pulled it into a gravity well at last. He appeared back in his peripheral vision just as Ryoma sunk to his knees. "Echizen!"

"S'okay," he insisted, blood-slicked fingers fumbling for one of the healing pins. He dropped it on the ground, and scrabbled to pick it up. "Just have to..."

The pin slipped through his fingers again. It was so hard to concentrate. It looked like he was looking at the world through a bad television set, with fuzzy interference obscuring the picture.

Long, calloused fingers plucked the pin from the ground. Ryoma felt warmth spread over his injuries, and in a somewhat eerie fashion, could almost feel the skin knitting back together. The fogginess in his head started to clear. Blearily, he focused on the dark brown eyes staring down at him. Tezuka had his head propped up in his lap - when did he wind up in that position? - and the pin clutched between his thumb and forefinger.

"You were careless."

"Hn." He'd nearly been erased, and all Tezuka could do was lecture him? "Didn't know you could use that psych."

"Neither did I. Are you alright?"

Ryoma pushed himself up, hand feeling his side. It was still coated in blood, but the skin underneath was smooth. Tezuka did a superb job. How annoying. They possessed a relatively complimentary set of psychs so far, but it irked Ryoma slightly that Tezuka was better at one than he was. "It's fine now.... Thanks," he added grudgingly. He pushed himself to his feet and did a quick scan. Tezuka's team mates were free of Noise, and it looked like the fight had been broken up. The court still had at least two dozen Noise to take care

of, though. "C'mon, we still have to take out the rest. There's not a whole lot of time." The threatening red numbers were still ticking down on his palm.

"Are you sure-"

"It's *fine*," Ryoma insisted irritably. He was more annoyed with himself for getting hurt in the first place.

Tezuka made to hand the pin back to him, but Ryoma waved it away. "You keep it."

"But-"

He wasn't going to admit *out loud* that Tezuka was better with that psych than he was, so Ryoma just barrelled into the next battle. He'd just practice with the next pin of that sort they got and get better, and then it wouldn't be an issue anymore.

It seemed that getting rid of that Noise had done the trick, as no new Noise turned up to replace the ones they cleared this time. At some point Ryoma noticed another pair of Players on the other end of the court clearing some away too, which was just as well as the timer on his hand was getting dangerously close to zero. A tennis ball whizzed past his head, but he didn't pay it any mind. It looked like the fractured remains of Tezuka's tennis club finally got practice started, but they were oblivious to the Noise and Players on their courts. Ryoma deflected one stray ball with psychokinesis, which set the guy with glasses scribbling in his notebook, muttering about a new technique with an even sharper angle than some sort of 'snake'.

At last, the final Noise vanished into the ether. Panting to catch his breath, Ryoma glanced at his hand, just before the timer vanished. A minute and a half. They'd cut it close.

Tezuka was bowing formally to the other pair of Players, who'd just erased the last Noise. Some high school guy and a little kid. They looked like they might be family.

"Hey, when's that Tournament?" he asked suddenly.

"Sunday," Tezuka replied as he straightened.

Ryoma did the math. The Game *started* on a Sunday - at least, he was pretty sure it had. "You know, it's only seven days, so when we finish the game, you'll still be able to go compete then, right?"

"... I suppose."

Ryoma nodded, satisfied. "Then it's no problem. I don't really like tennis, but I'll come watch. In the RG."

Tezuka looked surprised, then said, "... It's a promise?"

Promises seemed like such a child-like thing to make, but just this once, Ryoma put his pride aside. "I guess."

Tezuka had a future and a life to get back to. Ryoma didn't quite know what exactly he was supposed to do with his second chance at life, but at the very least he'd put his uneasiness aside and finish the game for Tezuka. They'd get back to the RG together. He'd figure out what came after later.

Fifth Day, End.

The Sixth Day

Author's Note: Thanks to everyone for the reviews so far. There's been a few questions about things such as how characters died, and just for reassurance - of course it will all be explained! It would make a pretty lousy story otherwise. ;) Hope you enjoy this chapter.

The Sixth Day

It was the footpath next to the bus stop again. Tezuka was already awake this time, standing next to him like a guard with the Player pin clutched in his hands.

He sat up with a yawn, rubbing at his eyes. "You're awake?"

"Not for long."

"The mission?"

On cue, their phones beeped. Ryoma grumbled to himself as he stood, retrieving the phone from his pocket.

Pain lanced like a bolt of electricity through his hand. Cursing, he fumbled to open the phone. *'Go to the northern riverbank. You have two hours.'*

The red numbers ticked down on his palm. Strange how he was getting used to that. Tezuka rubbed his own hand briefly, slipping his phone back into his pocket. "The river is right on the edge of the boundary. Two hours isn't a lot of time."

"Should we run?"

"... That could cause accidents. But we should walk briskly."

Tezuka was probably the only person in the world who would actually say the word 'briskly' in normal conversation.

... Not that Ryoma had anything to compare against. "Which way?"

They headed out at a quick pace, Ryoma having to double-step at times to keep up with Tezuka's long strides.

It was still rather early in the morning, so the streets were filled with salary men on their way to work and students on their way to school. Since the mission time limit was so short it didn't look like there'd be much time for eating. That was annoying. It was harder fighting on an empty stomach. The effectiveness of psychs appeared to be directly correlated to the strength of focus and concentration, both of which could be compromised by an empty stomach. Oh well. He still had blood on his shirt anyway - he probably wouldn't be well received at the ramen place.

While he was contemplating how much he'd rather eat some burgers instead of ramen for a change, Tezuka's 'brisk' pace suddenly halted. Ryoma very nearly ran into him, stopping and glaring. "Hey, what's the-" The words died in his mouth when he saw his partner's expression.

Generally, he'd accepted that Tezuka had just a slightly wider emotional range than your average rock. The look in his eyes now, however, was one that Ryoma hadn't seen before. He was staring intensely, almost like he was trying to scan someone, only he wasn't clutching his Player pin.

His fingers were reaching for it, though.

It was strange. Generally Tezuka didn't like scanning - said it was an 'invasion of privacy'. Ryoma didn't particularly like hearing all the random stupid boring things people were thinking about either, but had no such moral dilemma if he wanted to find something out or complete a mission.

Golden eyes traced the path of his gaze and eventually found the source of the disturbance. A group of people - some of them looked familiar. Members of the tennis club from the day before, he recalled belatedly. It looked like they were on their way to school. There were a couple he didn't recognise.

It was the slight, light-brown-haired student across the way that Tezuka was staring at with a scarily intense expression. Ryoma looked closer, trying to see what made him stand out, but a sharp pain suddenly burned through his head. He stumbled back. "Ugh."

Tezuka tore his attention away and caught his shoulder. "Echizen? Is something the matter?"

"S'nothing," he mumbled. "Just... my head..." It felt like invisible knives stabbing the back of his eyes.

The fingers clutching his shoulders tightened. After a moment the headache started to abate. Tentatively, Ryoma opened eyes he didn't remember closing and raised his head, looking around. "Huh, it went away." He glanced back over. "Where did that guy go? The one you were staring at."

"You noticed?"

"Kind of hard not to."

"... He left," Tezuka replied dispassionately.

"Weren't you going to scan him?"

A pause. Tezuka was probably embarrassed at being caught out in his temptation after his moral grandstanding. Ryoma was tempted to call him on it, but it was clear that his partner had been bothered by it, and that in turn bothered him.

Eventually Tezuka answered, "It doesn't matter. We should continue with the mission. There's not much time."

Ryoma frowned. That guy had been with a bunch of people that Tezuka said were his friends before. Did that mean he was also a friend? The expression on Tezuka's face - subtle though it might have been - had been sort of cold, though. Maybe they didn't get along?

They continued the rest of the way to the bridge in silence - Tezuka deep in thought after the encounter and Ryoma quietly wondering what it was that had his partner so unsettled. They encountered one wall, manned by Arai of all people, who sulkily summoned a single Noise for them to defeat before letting them pass. It took a couple of minutes to take care of that, and then they were on their way.

Soon enough, the river was in sight. By unspoken agreement, they picked up their pace until they were standing on the grassy riverbank. It was quiet except for the lapping of water at the shore and the distant rumble of traffic.

"We're here, but the timer isn't disappearing." Ryoma frowned, staring at the red numbers ticking down on his palm as though the force of his glare alone would be enough to make them disappear.

"The north bank," Tezuka murmured. "We're on the south bank."

It figured. There was a bridge a short distance away, and they still had twenty minutes. "Let's go then."

As they headed towards the crossing, though, Ryoma found his feet stopping. He stared at the bridge, an unpleasant sensation crawling across his skin. Tezuka hesitated, looking back. "Is something the matter?"

He clutched his Player Pin. It was weird. He thought he could sense something... and yet, nothing came up in the scan. It was like there was something filling space where there ought to be emptiness.

"... I don't think the bridge is a good idea," he muttered eventually.

Tezuka glanced between him and the bridge. "Why?"

It was hard to explain. Ryoma trusted his instincts, and there was something off about the scan. "Just a bad feeling," he mumbled.

Dark brown eyes regarded him for a long moment. Eventually Tezuka turned away. "We'll have to find another way across then." He started retracing their steps to the riverbank.

"You believe me?" Ryoma didn't know what he'd been expecting, but not Tezuka's matter-of-fact acceptance based on something as vague as a 'bad feeling'.

"You have more practice at scanning than I do. If you think there's something wrong, I doubt it's just your imagination," he said seriously. "... We'll just have to wade across. It's not that deep - Inui told me that Kaidoh often trains here." He plucked a stray plastic bag from the ground, placed his wallet and pins safely inside, then extended it to Ryoma who grudgingly added his own. Tezuka tied the bag closed and looped it around his neck, then held out his hand.

Ryoma looked at it quizzically. "The current is strong," Tezuka warned. "If we get separated..."

A Noise would find them or they wouldn't be able to complete the mission properly, and they'd both wind up erased. Ryoma interlaced their fingers together, hand firmly clasped in Tezuka's. It was answer enough.

They only had seven more minutes now. There was no putting it off.

They waded into the river. Belatedly Ryoma realised that they probably should have taken their shoes off and tied them around their necks too, as they dragged heavily in the water. The water was unexpectedly cold and the undercurrent sucked at his legs with surprising strength. Ryoma resolutely ignored it, tightening his grip on Tezuka's hand and wading deeper into the river. It was still safer

than facing the bridge. The river might be mucky and cold and the current strong, but there were no unpleasant surprises.

At least until about a third of the way in, when he quickly realised that there was in fact another problem. Tezuka could indeed make it across without a problem. But while Tezuka was only waist-deep in the water, it was already up to Ryoma's chest. Wading was already becoming difficult. If it reached Tezuka's armpits it would be over his head. Not for the first time Ryoma cursed his lack of height.

He could swim - again he didn't remember how, only he knew that he could - but the current was powerful and his clothes weighed him down like lead scarves. Add that to the fact that his stronger left arm was clinging to Tezuka and he could only propel himself forward with his weaker right arm...

The water grew higher. It sloshed over his shoulders. Tezuka continued forging ahead determinedly. Ryoma kicked erratically, trying to keep afloat and moving forward, even as the current pulled him sideways. The water continued to rise, and his feet left the riverbed. Panic started to set in. "Tezuka-"

Tezuka glanced back, and his eyes widened.

"Echizen!" The words were swallowed as Ryoma's head slipped underwater.

It was as though direction became meaningless. Kicking frantically now, Ryoma broke the surface again with a gasp, before the current pulled him back under and a rumble filled his ears.

"Echizen!" Tezuka's voice was muted but he could feel the water dragging on him as a force pulled him forward, the strain on his left arm still clinging to his partner growing almost painful.

Flailing about wildly, he managed to push his head above the water again, but only long enough to grab a gasp of air, followed by a mouthful of water as the current pulled him down again. His lungs

grew tight. The water seemed like it was growing more shallow but it felt like forever before Ryoma's feet found the riverbed again, and even then they seemed to just slip out from under him, his footing sucked away by the current. The only steadfast point of orientation was that death grip on his hand, anchoring him to his partner.

After what felt like an eternity Ryoma was half-dragged, half-crawled on to the riverbank. He coughed and spluttered, making a face at the taste of the foul drain water. 'River' was probably a generous term for that particular landmark.

"Are you alright?" Tezuka asked worriedly, still clutching his hand and patting him on the back as he spat out a mouthful of silty water.

"The timer...?" he coughed.

"Gone," he assured him, plucking out a wet leaf that had found its way into Ryoma's hair.

He let out a sigh at that, closing his eyes. They'd cut it far too close the past two days. After a moment, he mumbled, "Lost my cap."

"I'll buy you a new one. We have enough money."

"And a shoe." He stared at his feet. The other shoe was covered in mud anyway. He probably didn't want to know what the lost one looked like.

"My shoes need replacing as well," Tezuka admitted. They'd been pristine white before but were now a sort of splotchy grey.

"Well, look what we have here," a cultured voice interrupted. They both whirled around, searching for the source. It was a pair of Reapers on the bridge. "An interesting detour. It seems that we were spotted."

"Fucking annoying," the white-haired one with the rat-tail growled. "Spent ages on that trap."

"Yes, we fooled plenty of others with the same trick," the one wearing glasses agreed. Ryoma couldn't stop staring at him. He reminded him a lot of Tezuka - his hair was just a little flatter, and his features a little rounder. There was also the small matter of the black skeletal wings sprouting from his back. They were both wearing yellow shirts like the Game Master. Did that mean they were special Reapers?

"Heeeh, you're lame enough to use the same trick twice?" Ryoma deadpanned.

That earned him a matching set of twitching eyebrows. "Certainly, we expected as much from you," the one with glasses stated, straightening up into an almost regal pose. "Honestly, when Kirihara said you two were in the game I did not initially believe him."

"Then we heard about your deaths in the RG," the other one added with a leer. "Too damn good to be true."

Deaths? Plural? Before he could ask, though, Tezuka stated, "Niou and Yagyuu. Also from Rikkai's tennis club. Three of your members are Reapers?"

They both smirked at that. "Yo, should we tell them Yagyuu?" the white-haired one drawled.

"We've got our orders, Niou."

"Fuck orders." He didn't say anything else, though.

Yagyuu smiled. It was a cold sort of smile - polite and without any real joy. "There was quite a bit of tragedy in our club a while ago. That's all you need to know."

"And you became Reapers."

"Harriers. We're not like those lame Wall Reapers, ya know." Niou lounged on the bridge railing, dangling his feet over the edge. "It's our job to take out Players."

"Nothing personal, you understand," Yagyuu added. "But a Harrier's lifespan is extended by how many Players they erase."

Tezuka was already untying the bag with the pins in it.

"There's no need for that, I promise," Yagyuu assured them.

"Reapers aren't allowed to attack the Players directly until tomorrow."

"But you set a trap," Ryoma pointed out coolly.

"We have to be enterprising in our methods of taking out players, particularly ones strong enough to have lasted this long. Just summoning Noise in plain sight isn't very effective." Yagyuu adjusted his glasses. They caught the afternoon sunlight, flaring brightly. "It seems you've managed to escape any other Harriers so far. You've been lucky."

Tezuka was reaching for the pins again.

"Heh, I'd really like to sick some Noise on ya to make up for it," Niou drawled, "But Kirihsara wants to deal with you two personally. Ordered hands off. I say fuck him, but Yagyuu here says he's Game Master."

"Games have to have rules," was Yagyuu's eminently reasonable response.

"Set by the Composer and Conductor." Niou snickered at something he seemed to find funny about that, and Ryoma's interest was piqued. Composer? Conductor?

"And if you don't mind my asking, how long have you been Reapers?" Tezuka was keeping very calm, given the situation. Ryoma blinked, feeling a pin touch his fingers, and had to suppress a smile as he slid it up his sleeve. Tezuka was never careless.

"Longer than you've been Players." Niou smirked.

Yaguu's phone beeped. He frowned and flipped it open. "Yaguu here." His frown deepened. "Understood." He flipped it shut again. "Niou."

He groaned. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Well, it was nice knowing ya. But tomorrow's the last day. Kirihara's going to make mincemeat outta ya." He grinned, running a hand through his hair. "Puri."

Ryoma had several retorts for that, but didn't get the chance to use any of them as the pair of Reapers left. That had been slightly nerve-racking. At least he hadn't nearly drowned himself for just a bad feeling. Water was still dripping from his hair, but being cold and wet was better than being erased.

"It sounds as though we're going to have to be careful tomorrow," Tezuka mused, sorting through the pins properly and handing the rest back over to Ryoma.

"Che. They're probably all talk," he dismissed.

"Hn." Tezuka didn't sound convinced.

One thing did sort of unsettle him, though. "Didn't this mission... you know... seem sort of easy?" Ryoma asked. Sure, it had been tight on time, but the only real obstacle had been getting across the river, and if weren't for the Harriers setting traps even that would have been simple.

"That's no excuse for getting careless."

Ryoma sighed to himself, scuffing a sodden shoe on the ground. "Not what I meant."

They stood there in silence for a moment. If anyone were able to see them, they'd look a sorry sight - Ryoma was drenched from head to toe, missing a shoe and hair still dripping cold water onto his already soaked and still blood-stained shirt. Tezuka looked a little better, but his clothes were sodden as well, sagging under the weight of the

water they held. He hadn't let go of his hand yet, Ryoma realised - he'd even sorted through the pins one-handed. Somewhat reluctantly, Ryoma let his fingers relax, and his hand drop. Tezuka blinked. "Oh, my apologies."

Ryoma had to stifle a chuckle. Tezuka was always so *polite* . It was exasperating at first, but it had become endearing at some point. "S'nothing," he murmured, cheeks warm at the memory of the worry colouring Tezuka's voice as he pulled him ashore.

He didn't think it possible, but in this crazy world, he'd grown sort of fond of this stranger he'd partnered up with. Maybe it was just a lack of choice, but Ryoma had trouble believing that. There was something about Tezuka... there was a dependability about him, a sort of aura that drew you in. He didn't waste words, or offer meaningless platitudes over their predicament... he just took the problem head on, and expected Ryoma to do the same.

Was it friendship? He wasn't sure what to call it. They were just partners, he guessed. That would have to do.

Sixth Day, End.

The Seventh Day

The Seventh Day

Ryoma opened his eyes and shivered, then sat up abruptly. Or rather, tried to. Tezuka was apparently unconscious and sprawled across him, his weight very effectively keeping Ryoma pinned.

He flopped back against the ground, and rolled his head to the side. The bus stop again.

It was the seventh day. The last day. All they had to do was survive long enough to complete the mission.

Their clothes had dried some, but were sort of damp, and Ryoma was still missing his cap. He wondered if you could catch a cold when you were dead, but Tezuka's body was warm, and the sun on his face was soothing. Right at that moment, Ryoma had a hard time believing that he wasn't actually alive.

He probably should do something about moving Tezuka, but he was tired and Tezuka was heavy. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, brown hair tickling his face. It was mostly just the vague scent of grass and fish - clearly leftover from the river - but he could also pick up on just a hint of lavender and something vaguely vanilla. It was rather pleasant, and for just a second Ryoma found himself wishing that the moment could last forever. He didn't dwell on the why or the how - nothing else seemed to matter.

Eyelashes fluttered briefly, and Tezuka let out a barely audible groan that Ryoma could feel rumble from his stomach all the way up to his throat. He shivered slightly, but managed to keep his expression bored and indifferent when those deep brown eyes opened and stared at him.

"... Echizen?"

"Tezuka, you're heavy," he stated in a droll tone.

Tezuka blinked several times, then nearly elbowed Ryoma in the face in his haste to stand. "I'm sorry, I-"

Ryoma waved it off with a yawn. "The mission should be arriving any minute. The last one." As eager as he was to get out of this dangerous and surreal game, it left him almost melancholic.

Their phones beeped. Ryoma noted with some dry amusement that his partner's was still using the descending trill he'd changed it to on the sly. Still, the small mobile felt abnormally heavy when he flipped it open.

"Defeat the Game Master at the street courts. You have 4 hours."

"Another tennis game? Think you can handle it?" Ryoma asked. He certainly wasn't willing to bet their success on his own skills.

"I haven't played him before, so there's no way of knowing for sure."

By now, Ryoma could spot Tezuka's modesty for what it was. He relaxed slightly. "Good."

"I won't be able to play like this, though. The street courts aren't far. Let's get some fresh clothes first," Tezuka suggested, then frowned. "And a tennis racquet."

Ryoma was currently limping around in only one shoe, so he was very much in favour of that idea. It only took them a few minutes to locate a clothing store with an emblem - one that fortunately had everything they needed. The sales staff obviously had no idea how to react to them when they entered - on one hand, they looked a mess, but on the other hand it was clearly obvious that they *needed* new clothes. In any case, Tezuka didn't give them the chance to decide as he efficiently went from rack to rack, pulling out a light purple button-up shirt for himself as well as a white t-shirt, then a white tee with two black stripes in Ryoma's size. They both wound

up with the same black pants in different sizes, grabbed some socks, then lingered for a minute at the shoes, both getting sneakers as anything else wouldn't make any sense given the situation.

They didn't try anything on - there wasn't enough time. They spent another moment in what seemed to be the sports section - it had a very small array of racquets that Tezuka looked over disapprovingly before selecting one, taking a few swings with it, then stating, "It will have to do."

Their last stop was so that Ryoma could grab another cap - a white Fila one, exactly like the one he'd lost. Somehow Tezuka had calculated everything out perfectly, so they had just enough money left over for ramen. They grabbed their purchases and were back outside, the whole affair not even taking twenty minutes.

Once out on the street, Ryoma shrugged off his still-damp shirt. "What are you doing?" Tezuka asked sounding scandalised.

"Getting changed, obviously."

"*Here ?*"

Ryoma smirked, and gave his partner a sly glance. "It's not like anyone can see us, you know." He pulled off his sodden shoe and socks.

Tezuka frowned, glancing back. "I'm sure they'd let us use the change rooms in the store."

It would have been a better idea, but they'd spooked the sales people enough as it was. Ryoma went to unbuckle his pants and frowned, hesitating. Granted, they were invisible to everyone in the RG, but that didn't mean he was entirely comfortable with shedding his pants in public. "Turn around," he grumbled to his partner. Tezuka immediately obliged.

Fresh clothes really did feel a lot better - if nothing else, it was nice to get rid of that torn and bloodstained shirt. When he turned back around it appeared that Tezuka had given in to practicality, as he'd pulled off his own shirt. Ryoma's eyes fastened on to the bare back, and he was mildly surprised at how well toned the musculature there was. It stood to reason, given Tezuka's displayed prowess in tennis, but on first impressions he resembled a bookworm who didn't see sunlight. It was the glasses and manners, Ryoma decided.

He tore his eyes away when Tezuka started changing out of his pants, though. He wasn't a pervert, no matter his curiosity. Not like his... that thought confounded him for a moment, as though he'd almost grasped something, but it slipped through his figurative fingers.

Ryoma tugged on the new socks and shoes. The shoes were a little tight, but after a day of walking around and stretching them they would fit perfectly. In any case, it was better than walking around barefoot.

"Ready?" Tezuka asked.

Not even slightly. "Let's go," Ryoma muttered.

They headed to the street courts, stopping only long enough to very quickly eat some ramen. Ryoma scanned regularly now, checking for any Noise traps or Harriers that might be coming after them. If what that pair said the day before was true, they could find themselves in a fight with an actual Reaper. Ryoma didn't have any moral difficulties with erasing someone who was trying to erase him but he was also willing to bet that fighting a Reaper would be a lot harder than fighting Noise. Snatches of thoughts crept in at the edge of his senses every time he scanned, though, making it harder to filter for those ominous empty spaces. That was one thing he wasn't going to miss in the RG. ESP wasn't all that it was cracked up to be.

The street courts were just around the corner. For one moment, Ryoma was seized by insecurity and indecision. They'd lasted

together this far... but back in the RG Tezuka would have his friends and his tennis club and his life back again. Would he still want anything to do with him? He might have only put up with Ryoma for the sake of the game - maybe after this that would be it. Ryoma would come watch his tournament, and then what? How would Tezuka explain a new hanger-on?

The thought was faintly terrifying. Ryoma didn't know anyone else. But he was also quite sure that he didn't know how to be scared, and so clenched his fists determinedly and headed on to the street courts.

Kirihara was waiting for them. He turned when they arrived, and his face split into a crazy grin. "You made it! Good."

"Of course." Tezuka gripped the handle of his racquet a little tighter.

The Game Master glanced at it. "What did you bring that for?"

"Tennis," Tezuka answered, in a tone that suggested it was obvious.

Kirihara stared at them, then abruptly burst out into maniacal laughter. He laughed for so long Ryoma thought he might faint from lack of breath. "Hey."

" *Tennis* ? You thought you were going to defeat me in *tennis* ?!" Kirihara was almost gasping for breath amidst his laughter.

Tezuka frowned. It was only a slightly deeper expression than his usual frown. He didn't reply.

Kirihara raised an arm, his black skeletal wings flaring out slightly. His hand almost resembled a claw held like that, and his bloodshot eyes seemed to almost glow. "I'm not interested in defeating you with tennis anymore. I've found something much better as a Reaper!"

Ryoma understood before Tezuka did. He clutched his fire pin, and rested his weight on the balls of his feet. Kirihara wanted a fight.

He'd wanted a fight from the very instant he'd discovered Tezuka in the game. This whole mission was so that they'd come right to him for this battle.

It was do-or-die. Only one side would get to walk away. "Tezuka."

"I know." Tezuka placed the racquet on the ground carefully, clutching one of his own pins in its place.

"Ha, glad to see you get it!" Kirihsara swiped his hand horizontally in a violent motion. For an instant, it was like the air warped around them, and then they were in the zone.

Ryoma didn't waste an instant - the minute he spotted Kirihsara, he focused his flames. When the fire cleared, though, all he was fighting was a black shadow that resembled something more like a demon. It was *fast*. Ryoma whirled to the side to avoid a clawed hand slashing out at him, swinging his own arm as he did so. An almost transparent blade left a trail in the air, and the shadow hissed. It was a guttural, angry sound - a mere echo of Kirihsara's actual voice.

There was energy in the air, and Ryoma knew that Tezuka was doing something big. A moment later the shadow seemed to shift, and regular old Kirihsara was in front of him again, albeit levitating just slightly off the ground. This didn't bother him - Ryoma found that when using some of his psychs he'd levitate without noticing himself. He threw out a stream of lightning that crackled through the air. It made a direct hit and Kirihsara doubled over, cursing, before sending out several bolts of energy. Ryoma avoided most of them, though the one that did glance across his knee didn't hurt that much. If all of them hit, though, it might have been a different matter. "Don't let him get successive strikes!" he called in warning, hoping that his own voice could carry across the zones the same way Tezuka's could.

He didn't receive an answer, but assumed it was because his partner was busy. Kirihsara was *fast* - if you stood still for even a moment he'd send a barrage of energy bolts at you, and even when moving he'd dart in to swipe at you, blood-shot eyes close enough that you could

see the veins. Ryoma was picking up a nice collection of bruises and grazes, but grit his teeth and sent forth a flurry of whirlwinds to buy some time to get his bearings. He was right - fighting a Reaper was quite different to fighting a Noise. Kirihsara was intelligent, for one, and would actually dodge his attacks and always act in that short moment when he was concentrating on activating a psych.

Kirihsara halted suddenly, a strange expression on his face. Tezuka must be doing some serious fireworks, Ryoma surmised, and dashed in, pin clutched between his fingers. He slashed upwards.

He'd been expecting blood - and indeed, there seemed to be a spray of what looked like blood, but it transformed into a black substance that evaporated as it hit air. Kirihsara's image distorted and fuzzed, as though he was getting bad reception, and he stumbled back. He laughed, but it was weak and unstable now - the strong, proud maniacal laughter of earlier just a distant memory.

"Impossible... you... it can't be. I'm the strongest! I can't lose!" He staggered back, seeming to fade in and out of sight. "I can't-

He never finished the sentence. One second here was there, and the next he was gone. Erased.

Ryoma felt a bit odd about that. Regretful, almost. Which didn't make any sense, because the Game Master had been trying his hardest to erase *them*. It was only fair.

Erasure was horrible, though.

It didn't matter. They didn't need to worry about erasure anymore. They'd done it. They'd finished the Game. Ryoma felt his shoulders sag in relief. Tezuka was next to him again. He didn't say anything, but he could practically feel the relief there as well. Absently, he plucked a light blue pin from the ground.

Light flashed.

For a moment, Ryoma was disorientated. They were in a spacious room. There were no windows, so he assumed it was underground. The floor was marble and the walls covered in mirrors. It was strange, though. Just a moment ago they'd been standing on the street courts, but then, it was no surprise after all those mornings of waking up in strange places.

"Congratulations on finishing the game."

Ryoma turned slowly at the voice, careful not to show his surprise. Tezuka was less successful. "Sanada?"

It was another Reaper, definitely - the wings were a dead giveaway. He was wearing the same yellow shirt that those two Harriers and Kiriwara had been wearing, too. He was also sporting a black cap and an expression possibly even more serious than Tezuka's.

Ryoma glanced between them suspiciously. "You know this guy too?"

"In the RG," Tezuka explained. "He's the vice-captain of Rikkai's tennis team. But Rikkai isn't..."

"This zone might be called Seishun," Sanada interrupted, "But it encompasses quite a large area."

"We know where the boundaries area. Rikkai isn't within it," Tezuka stated.

Rikkai again. By Ryoma's count, that tennis team had four Reapers in the game? Maybe more Tezuka hadn't known about. Did their school burn down or something?

He supposed it could have happened a long time ago. They were Reapers, so they could still interact with the RG. It made sense that if they'd met up in the UG, they might want to stick together in the RG, apparently by all joining the same tennis club. It made it a very

creepy tennis club in Ryoma's opinion. Was it an exclusive thing - dead people only allowed?

"Reapers are not confined in the same way that Players are." It appeared that was the only answer Sanada was willing to give the question. "... I see you took out Kirihara."

That made Ryoma tense. If they'd been team mates this Sanada person would probably be annoyed. "We had no choice," Tezuka replied evenly. "If there was any other way..."

Sanada nodded. "It was Kirihara's decision. A loss, but he knew the risks when he issued the mission." There was definite displeasure in his expression, but Sanada appeared to be all business. "And now, as Conductor, it is my duty to grant you your reward."

"Wait... we're all that's left?" Ryoma asked.

"You were the only Players to finish the game," Sanada confirmed.

Everyone else had been erased? That pair at the tennis tournament? The high schooler and the little kid who'd helped them clear Noise at Seigaku? Ryoma felt sick suddenly. They were strangers, but they'd been comrades, sort of.

"Conductor?" Tezuka asked. Ryoma belatedly remembered the term. The white-haired Harrier had mentioned it - something about setting rules, and a Composer, too.

"The game is run by the Composer. As Conductor, it is my duty to execute his will. And now, the time has come to conclude matters." Sanada smiled now, but it was a cold and empty smile and didn't seem to fit on his face at all. "It was a surprise to see familiar faces, but as expected, you played the Game wonderfully. I'm not surprised that you finished successfully. Are you ready?"

Ryoma and Tezuka both nodded firmly.

"Good luck to you, then. You first, Tezuka."

The light that shone was so bright it was nearly blinding.

Seventh Day, End.

...

Footsteps clattered on a concrete path, mindless chatter filling the air as people walked past. Traffic rumbled on the street nearby, drowning out the twitter of birdsong and rustling of the wind.

He was alone.

Ryoma stood up, dusted his the dirt from knees, and stared dully at the bus stop timetable.

'You have 7 days.'

It was Sunday.

Day One

Author's Note: Did you think that we were done? Oh no, this party is only just getting started. :D

Day One

Ryoma stuck his hands in his pocket as his phone beeped, then pulled it out and flipped it open. *"Go to Seigaku. Time limit: 2 hours. Fail, and face erasure."* That familiar zap, and red numbers ticked down on his palm once again. He didn't even flinch at the pain this time.

Not particularly imaginative, but it was the first mission after all. First order of business was finding another Player to make a pact with. He was reluctant, but it was necessary for survival. The Noise wouldn't take long to get him at all, otherwise.

He was *tired* . But he didn't have a choice.

"Buchou..." he murmured.

Tezuka wouldn't know what had happened. Ryoma felt bad about that, but at the same time, he was a little relieved.

There weren't many people around. He displayed his Player Pin prominently, so that other Players could see it. Someone strong was preferable, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Where would people go if they needed to find other Players?

Probably head towards Seigaku, he decided. He wouldn't be able to get in without a pact, but all the Players should theoretically be heading in that direction. He set out at a brisk walk, keeping a nervous eye out for Noise. Without a pact, they'd come after him directly and he wouldn't be able to fight.

He'd been surprised to discover that the Conductor was Sanada. Considering that they'd met in the RG before, one would think that he'd be a little more lenient. Unless he was still sore about losing the Nationals. Actually, thinking about it now, that wouldn't surprise Ryoma at all.

The day before, though... he shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, quickening his stride as the memories insisted on repeating in his brain like a bad movie.

Ryoma gasped as Tezuka's visage dissolved into motes of light. It was like the air was being sucked from his lungs. It was cold, so cold. The strength left his legs, and he dropped to his knees.

It was the pact, he realised. With Tezuka returning to the RG, the pact had been broken.

The Conductor was still there. Annoyed, Ryoma struggled to his feet. He didn't want to appear weak. He glared. "So what now?"

" Now... the matter of the entry fee," Sanada said.

Ryoma almost stumbled. Images, sensation, voices... it all came flooding back to him with dizzying clarity. It was like a thick fog had been lifted from his mind. It was his memories... he remembered everything. Sanada - he already knew Sanada! And Arai! And that girl with the red pig-tails had been Tomoka. Momoshiro. Seigaku's tennis club.

Tezuka.

Tezuka had known who he was the entire time, and hadn't told him! All those weird looks suddenly made sense. Ryoma was vaguely irritated. He should have just told him! It would have made things so much simpler!

... Although would it have made a difference?

He didn't dwell on it. Tezuka was already back in the RG - Ryoma could chew him out when he made it there himself. He did have one question, though. "Entry fee?"

" To play the Game, the Players are required to give up that which they value the most," Sanada reported coolly.

So his memories had been his entry fee? That made sense then, he supposed. It was a bit unfair to not leave him with any that explained the game, though. He wondered idly what Tezuka's entry fee had been.

For that matter... he was still having trouble remembering how exactly it was that he died. "Hey, give them all back."

" I did."

" I still can't remember how I died."

Sanada was deep in thought for a long moment, then said, "I cannot explain that. I've returned what was taken from you."

There was another explanation then. Annoying. "So... you're a Reaper. How did that happen?"

The question seemed to anger Sanada - at least, his brow furrowed just a little deeper than normal. "That's none of your business."

Ryoma could appreciate that, he supposed. He didn't like people butting into his business either. "How long, then?" Had Sanada been a Reaper at the Nationals? But then, it looked like Conductor was pretty high up the food chain - he'd probably been a Reaper for a while if he'd ascended the ranks that high. Arai had been a Reaper for two years after all, and only made it to Wall Reaper level. It was possible Rikkai's vice-captain had been a Reaper for the entire time he'd known him. It was vaguely unsettling to think that he might have been playing tennis against a dead person.

Either way, Sanada didn't answer. He merely crossed his arms and stared at Ryoma coldly.

Ryoma huffed. "Che. Fine. You can just send me back now then. It doesn't matter."

"... You won't be returning to the RG."

That pulled Ryoma up short. He blinked slowly. No words seemed appropriate.

" The Composer decided that only one Player would be granted the right to return to life. Based on your performances in the Game, that right was granted to Tezuka."

He wanted to say that it was unfair, and what was the deal with revealing something like that when the game was already finished? What was it all for? But in the end, Ryoma remained silent. Already the Game had proven itself unfair time and time again. Complaining about it was hardly going to change anything.

" It takes considerable power to perform that act, and there is the stability of the UG and RG to consider. The number of Players who can receive the privilege varies every Game."

" So what happens to me now, then?" Ryoma asked, voice low.

If Sanada was surprised by his lack of protest, he didn't show it. "You have a choice. You can choose to become a Reaper-

" I'll never become a Reaper," Ryoma interrupted. Erasing Players to sustain his own life? He wasn't interested. And being a Reaper had obviously finally sent Kiriwara off the deep end. Sanada could keep those black wings.

" In that case, the only choice is to play the Game again."

Ryoma paled, but managed to contain his reaction. Another week in that hell? Another week in that hell, without Tezuka?

He'd made a promise, though. He might not be able to make the Tournament, but he'd promised Tezuka that they'd both make it back to the RG. "I'll do it." Even if he was late, he was determined.

Sanada nodded as though he expected that answer. "There's the matter of your entry fee..."

Ryoma scowled, glaring at the ground simply so he didn't have to look at the so-called Conductor. "What, you're going to take my memories again?"

"Your entry fee is that which you hold most precious. It appears that after a week without it, you no longer consider your previous entry fee your most precious thing," Sanada stated.

Ryoma didn't look up. "And what would my most precious thing now be?"

" There's a cat you should be familiar with..."

Ryoma head snapped up. "Karupin?"

" Your entry fee has already been collected."

He glared, fingers reaching for a pin. "You can't..."

" Complete the game, and your cat will be returned to you." Sanada paused, then added, "He will be well cared for in the meantime."

They had Karupin. It wasn't just his own life on the line... it was Karupin's, too. He *needed* to complete the game again. Erasure was not an option.

Seigaku was close, but Ryoma's steps halted. Between him and his destination several shapes were starting to blur in and out of focus. He didn't even need to touch his Player Pin to know what they were. *Noise* .

They were coming his way.

Frantically, Ryoma grabbed his fire pin. The most he could summon was a tiny candle flame. Panicked, he tried his lightning pin next, but only static sparks shot from his fingers. There was one that shot energy rounds he rarely used, and it didn't do anything at all. He grabbed the pin for psychokinesis next, but couldn't lift anything heavier than a pebble.

He couldn't fight. Fear gripped him as the Noise started to come closer. Frog Noise again. They'd become nothing more than pesky nuisances towards the end of the previous week, but now they were suddenly terrifying. He clutched the fire pin again.

There was a flash of light, and the flickering candle suddenly exploded into a firestorm. The Noise vanished with a shriek.

Ryoma flinched. A pact? With who?

He instinctively recognised the presence of a pact after the one with Tezuka had been torn from him, but this didn't feel like the previous pact *at all*. The pact with Tezuka felt like a warm hug filled with light and security. *This* pact felt like cold water down his back.

"You're a Player, correct?"

The voice was oddly familiar. Slowly, Ryoma turned around. Took in the eyes, opened so slightly that they looked like they were closed. The dark brown hair in the bowl haircut. The yellow shirt.

"Yanagi Renji?" he guessed. The name felt dusty in his mind.

"That's right."

Rikkai again? Granted, this time it was a Player, but Ryoma must have seen over half the team in the Game so far. It was more than just a little suspicious. "You made the pact?"

"I hope you are not offended. You seem to know what you're doing, and I need a partner. And... if you don't mind me asking, how was it

that you knew my name?"

He stared, dubious. This was Rikkai's data master, right? "Echizen Ryoma. You don't remember me?"

"We've met?"

The realisation lanced through him like a bolt of electricity. "... What was your entry fee?" Ryoma asked.

Yanagi frowned. "... That's a rather personal question."

"Mine was my cat," Ryoma offered quietly.

Eventually, Yanagi relented. "... Data. It was my data."

He felt ill. Just like him... Yanagi had his memories stripped away too.

It helped that it seemed as though they'd left him with memories of the briefing. That would save Ryoma some grief. Sanada had probably gone easy on a classmate. But even so...

The entry fees were cruel. In a way, Ryoma was glad he'd been unaware of what he'd given up. It was somehow worse to know that there was more than even your life riding on the Game.

"... I've met you in the RG before," he answered warily. "We were on rival tennis teams. We've never played, though."

Yanagi considered that for a moment. "I see. It appears that taking my data involved taking my memories. You were not deliberately forgotten. But this should make things easier then, correct? Since you are at least familiar with who I am."

Not really. It actually made Ryoma *more* suspicious. How did Yanagi die? There was no point in asking when he was missing his memories. But it didn't matter - the pact was made. "You know how to fight the Noise?"

"I was given some pins, but haven't tested any yet."

There was still plenty of time to do so - Seigaku was only a couple of minutes walk away. Ryoma scanned and saw some more Frog Noise nearby. "Che. Come on, then."

Yanagi was extremely proficient with psychokinesis, but that was the most rudimentary of all the psychs, so Ryoma didn't put much stock in that. He seemed rather good at Force and Energy rounds, though - projectiles of heat and psychokinetic power. Ryoma could manage those too, but they didn't come as easily to him as the others, so he reluctantly handed over a couple of his spares. They went through about five or six Frog Noise, Ryoma trying out a few new pins himself - mostly ones that Yanagi couldn't use. He found that gravity well one Tezuka had been really fond of, as well as the one that rained fiery rocks. It took him a while to activate the psychs, but he was pleased when he finally managed to get it. It made him feel a little closer to his former partner, even if the gulf between life and death still separated them.

Ryoma checked his hand and blinked. The timer had disappeared. Seeing his expression, Yanagi checked his own hand. "Oh? What happened to the mission?"

"Some other players must have finished it first," Ryoma said.

"And stole all our fun doing it, too!" A voice drawled from above them.

The freshman tensed, ready for battle, eyes searching for the source of the familiar voice. He spied a glimpse of white hair out of the corner of his eyes and turned to face Niou and Yagyuu, perched on the roof of a building. Or rather, Yagyuu was standing and Niou had his legs dangling over the edge.

"You again?" Yagyuu asked, looking down on them. "Well, that explains things."

"I hate working this much," Niou complained, cracking his knuckles. "Two weeks in a row?! When has that ever happened?"

Yagyuu adjusted his glasses. "Oh, talking to some of the veteran Reapers it has happened before... just not for a long time."

"Reapers?" Yanagi asked.

"Oi, what's Yanagi doing with-"

Yagyuu appeared faintly amused. "An unexpected development."

"I see... I take it we have met before, then," Yanagi surmised.

Niou frowned. "Hey, Yagyuu."

"This must be what Sanada warned us about," Yagyuu agreed. "Data as the entry fee."

Niou laughed at that, slapping his knee. "That's rich!"

Ryoma kept a wary eye on the exchange. Technically they were enemies now - there was little to keep the two Harriers off their backs, unless whoever the new Game Master was ordered them away like Kirihara had. Yanagi was a complete beginner, too - Ryoma didn't like their chances if the pair of Harriers pulled a dirty trick on them. Hopefully, like Sanada, they would go easy on a friend.

"Names?" Yanagi asked.

"White-haired one is Niou, the one with glasses is Yagyuu," Ryoma answered in a low voice. Then added, "Probably. Sometimes they switch."

"How nice of you to notice," Niou grinned.

"I see. And our relations were..." Yanagi prompted.

"In the RG, we were-"

"Niou." Yagyuu's voice was pleasant and polite, as though he was merely issuing a reminder.

"Fuck, are we allowed to do *anything* anymore?! This is getting boring, you know. Sides, our orders were..."

"We'll report back to HQ first. We don't want to create any misunderstandings. There are other Players to bother in the meantime," Yagyuu said.

Ryoma relaxed, but only slightly. They were being given a pass. They'd have to watch out for other Harriers, but now that Ryoma knew to look out for them it shouldn't be a problem. Apparently sheer dumb luck had been all that got them through the first Game unbothered.

Grumbling, Niou pulled back from the ledge and stood, looking back over his shoulder. "You'd better be watching your backs." It was hard to tell whether it was a threat or a warning.

"Until next time." Yagyuu inclined his head politely in farewell, and the pair of Harriers left, presumably to cause havoc for other Players.

Yanagi was thoughtfully silent, which couldn't be a good sign. Eventually, he stated, "The statistical probability of meeting three dead people I knew while alive on the first day of the Game is less than 0.4 percent. That said, the probability of meeting further people I was once familiar with... 37 percent." He turned to Ryoma. "Care to fill me in on any other information I should know?"

He was abruptly reminded of the fact that Yanagi and Inui had once been friends. He didn't *need* memories to spout percentages and probabilities.

Ryoma sighed. It was going to be a long week.

Day One, End.

Day Two

Author's Note: Proof that I can't stay away from Tezuka POV.

Day Two

Tezuka didn't understand exactly how it worked - he'd been dead. He'd seen his former classmates grieving. Yet now here he was back at school, and they acted as though he'd simply been away. His parents, too.

Was that part of the Composer's powers? To just make everything as it was again?

Except that one very important thing was different. Echizen was still dead.

It left him uneasy. They completed the game, and Tezuka woke up in his bed on Sunday morning to the trilling of his alarm. In a somewhat dreamlike state, he'd greeted his parents, eaten breakfast and headed to the Tournament. It was only when Oishi waved to him that he believed it was real.

No one reacted at all to his return. There were no questions. Tezuka waited, heart light with the expectation of seeing his partner alive: On the court if his memory had returned, and in the stands if it hadn't.

Nothing. The others arrived, and he started to suspect that Echizen wouldn't be coming. Momoshiro angrily insisted that he was going to play and win in Ryoma's memory. The stands remained empty. The opposing team awkwardly offered their condolences at the start of the game. The pair of girls who normally cheered for Echizen were absent. Yet still, a part of him held hope and kept searching for a white cap, cocky smirk and golden eyes.

It was always possible that Ryoma didn't know where the Tournament was being held, he reasoned - it was outside of the boundaries of the game, and if his memories were still missing he wouldn't know where to go or how to get there. Tezuka played his game half-heartedly, winning easily, and checked the stands after match point.

Empty.

"Expecting someone, Tezuka?" Fuji asked.

Tezuka could feel a headache coming on. "Yes," he answered succinctly, not wanting to discuss anything with the prodigy right then.

Fuji apparently picked up on his mood, and backed off with a smile. "Maybe they just got the time wrong," he offered.

Tezuka wished it were as simple as that. He wanted to believe that was all it was.

He didn't remember talking to the rest of his team, but had some vague notion that he must have, because half an hour later he was standing alone in a park with his mobile in his hand. His fingers tapped out Echizen's number.

It was disconnected.

The buoyant feeling he'd experienced that morning at being alive again slowly started to dissolve into a sick sense of dread and worry.

That was why he was standing on an unfamiliar doorstep Monday morning instead of heading to morning practice.

Tezuka had a rather strong inkling as to who the Composer was, but in this instance was certain that the Conductor would be much more accommodating.

The door opened. "Good morning, Sanada," Tezuka greeted politely.

There were advantages to having Inui Sadaharu on your team. If Rikkai's vice-captain was surprised to see him on his doorstep, he didn't show it. "Tezuka Kunimitsu. What does Seigaku's tennis captain want with me so early in the morning?"

"The Game," Tezuka said. "Explain it to me."

For one brief moment, he thought he saw shock and suspicion flit across Sanada's face. "You remember, then."

"Am I not supposed to?" For a moment, he was concerned that he might have put those memories at risk by admitting to them.

Sanada was frowning. "It's unusual, but you did perform well in the Game. Although it might be because..." he trailed off there, and Tezuka had the strong impression that he'd been about to say something he wasn't supposed to. After a moment he continued, "I have ten minutes. You'd better come in."

Tezuka followed him inside, slipping off his shoes. It was a very traditional sort of house, and he recalled Inui mentioning that Sanada practiced martial arts.

It appeared he'd interrupted Rikkai's vice-captain in the middle of breakfast before school. Fortunately there were no parents in the vicinity - Tezuka wondered if Sanada lived alone or if they simply were at work. Did they know that their son was dead, but living on as a Reaper?

"What do you want to know?" Sanada asked brusquely.

"Everything." Tezuka knew he should be more specific than that, but wasn't sure he would be able to find the right questions. "Start on what the point is. Why the Game even exists."

Sanada thought on that for a moment, then began, "The Game is a purification process for the soul. Think of it like a Tournament. The worthiest are given the chance to return to life, and the runners-up

will either ascend to the higher plane or become Reapers. Those whose souls are weak and impure will fail and get erased in the early rounds. The fragments of their souls become Noise. The Game exists both to judge the Players, and to clean the area of excess Noise," Sanada explained.

"Ascending... you mean heaven," Tezuka surmised.

"Similar, yes. Those Players become Angels. Some are reborn."

"But most Players were erased."

"The Game exists for those who die young and unexpectedly, primarily. Their souls are still in a state of indecision. Most people either become Noise or ascend directly." Sanada sounded bored of the whole affair.

It made sense to Tezuka - he hadn't seen a single Player over thirty, which struck him as odd at the time. But the thought that all those Players who didn't make it were now just mindless, angry fragments of soul...

"It's a necessary thing to ensure the stability of the RG. That's the Composer's job," Sanada stated, as though sensing his concerns. "To ensure the UG does not swing out of control and corrupt the RG. There is a limit to how many people may be returned to life, and very few Players even finish the Game. Most become Reapers or are erased and become Noise."

It still struck Tezuka as terribly unbalanced, but then, he supposed the bad odds were compensated for by the possibility of a second chance at life. The Noise needed to be cleared regularly, and Reapers were required to run the game - if everybody could ascend or return to life the UG couldn't be sustained. "Surely the Composer could figure out a better system."

Sanada frowned. "It's the way things are. It goes higher than even the Composer."

Tezuka wanted to press the issue, but he had other questions. "The entry fee. Why is it that Echizen had to give up his memories, but I didn't have to give up anything at all?"

"I think there's some confusion," Sanada stated levelly. "Your entry fee was Echizen's memories. Echizen's entry fee was something else altogether."

Tezuka felt as though time stopped.

The thing he held most precious...

Sanada asked, "Does Echizen know he means that much to you?"

Tezuka didn't answer. His throat felt dry suddenly, and he swallowed. Every time Echizen hadn't recognised his classmates, or called him 'Tezuka' instead of 'Buchou', or didn't know where he was... it was like a knife through the heart. He'd just assumed that when Echizen didn't recognise him that the first-year's entry fee had been his memories, but the unexpected grief that came with being a stranger to the freshman left him unbalanced. Initially he'd been confused and hadn't known how to deal with it, so merely continued as though they hadn't met before. Once he'd started that, it was easier to keep pretending. But whose benefit had that been for? His, or Echizen's?

His only solace was that Echizen hadn't known any different. But the guilt that he'd been the one to inflict that on his kouhai...

"What was Echizen's entry fee?" he asked eventually.

"It's a confidential matter."

Tezuka shook his head. "Never mind." He already knew. Echizen's entry fee had been tennis.

Tezuka sat back, absorbing all that he learned. He didn't like a lot of it, but accepted why things had to be that way. There were rules and duties. Tezuka understood rules and duties.

"I have just one more question," Tezuka said.

"And that is?"

"What happened to Echizen? He hasn't returned to the RG. I can't find him anywhere."

Sanada hesitated for the briefest of moments. "He ascended. The Composer decreed that only you earned the right to return to life. Echizen turned down the offer to become a Reaper and moved on to a higher plane instead."

Tezuka studied Rikkai's vice-captain at length, then quietly stated, "You're lying."

Sanada stood abruptly. He'd been polite and forthcoming before, but his expression was closed now. "I don't have any more information to give you. I've told you too much already."

"Sanada."

"Please leave."

That was everything, then. He wasn't going to learn anything more from the Conductor. Tezuka stood and headed to the door, slipping on his shoes in the foyer. "Thank you for your time."

Once out on the street again, he placed his hand in his pocket, fingers closing around a cold, smooth circle.

He withdrew it and glanced down at his hand.

He still had his Player pin.

...

Ryoma tried not to roll his eyes as the Wall Reaper detailed the terms of passing. It was always some dumb errand - a pin, this time. Pins were useful in the UG, sure, but Ryoma hadn't actually seen a

Reaper use one yet, so he could only conclude that they were fashion accessories or trophies to show off how much they'd annoyed the Players. He and Yanagi retreated out of earshot.

"Do we have that one already?" Ryoma asked.

"No, but we had it this morning. We sold it to the Wall Reaper at the intersection next to the ramen shop."

Ryoma frowned. Just their luck - they'd have to kill Noise until they found another one. "What did we get it from?"

"The blue-coloured Frog Noise, I believe." Yanagi was useful in this regard - if it were up to him, Ryoma would have just had to erase every Noise he saw until he stumbled across the right one by chance.

"Let's go find some, then. Che, for such a lame mission, too."

"We could simply leave it to the other Players," Yanagi suggested. "If it weren't for the walls, we'd be finished already."

"I can't take that chance," Ryoma muttered, rubbing his Player pin. He quickly scanned, and spied some Noise. "Over there."

They made short work of the unsuspecting Frog Noise. Ryoma picked through the pins leftover, and held up the one requested. That was lucky. "Come on."

"There's no rush. We have plenty of time."

Sure, but that was no reason to loiter. Even though Ryoma had filled him in on most of the pertinent information about the game, Yanagi seemed wholly unconcerned about being dead. "Let's just go already."

"If you say so." Yanagi started retracing their steps.

Ryoma paused briefly before following, though. They were in front of Seigaku. It was still quite early in the day - apparently their current Game Master preferred to get the missions over with as soon as possible - so those students without club activities were just arriving, ambling through the gates and chatting without a care in the world. Momoshiro would already be at morning practice.

Then a familiar profile caught the corner of his eye, walking towards the school entrance with the other students.

Tezuka.

His breath caught in his throat. It hadn't even been a full two days, but it felt like he was seeing Tezuka for the first time since forever. He looked different alive. More vibrant and colourful, somehow.

His brow was creased in an even deeper frown than usual - he was troubled about something. Ryoma reached for his Player Pin, but his fingers stopped as they scraped the edge of the cold metal. Tezuka never approved of scanning, and only tolerated it because it was necessary.

"What's the hold up?" Yanagi asked, appearing by his side. "Oh? A friend of yours?"

Ryoma didn't answer. Tezuka was *right there*, but he couldn't see him, couldn't talk to him... they might as well have been on different continents.

Somehow, he felt even lonelier than when he didn't remember anyone at all.

Tezuka walked past. For a second, his gait slowed and his eyes scanned the crowd of students, sliding right over Ryoma. Not seeing anything, he continued on his way, disappearing into the building in a sea of black uniforms. Ryoma remained still, watching until he couldn't see him anymore.

"Do you want to follow?" Yanagi asked.

"No, it's okay. Let's finish the mission," Ryoma replied tonelessly, and turned away.

There were only two more walls between them and the far end of the mall, and they finished the mission with two hours to spare.

"That's the second day down. It was certainly easy," Yanagi remarked as the red numbers vanished.

Only because they hadn't been dogged by any Harriers. He'd seen Niou and Yagyuu earlier, but they'd blatantly ignored them. Ryoma wasn't sure whether to be relieved or suspicious.

At least he knew for sure that Tezuka made it back to the RG safely. For now, that was enough.

"... Wait for me, Buchou," he whispered.

Day Two, End.

Day Three

Day Three

Tezuka spent most of Monday rolling the Player Pin between his fingers, contemplating what it all meant. It was Tuesday morning now, and once again he was missing morning practice. It wasn't a good example for the rest of the team, but the official season was over anyway. His presence wouldn't be missed.

He was still uncertain as he headed to school. He wasn't sure what he was suspecting, but he was paranoid about holding that pin too tightly.

Seigaku loomed in front of him. He hesitated at the gates. He'd been struck by the weirdest sensation when passing by that very spot the day before, almost as though he was being watched.

Pressing his lips together in a firm line, Tezuka squeezed the pin.

Then blinked. It almost felt like space was warping around him. He couldn't scan thoughts anymore - though a part of him was relieved for that, as being able to read what his former team mates were thinking had been significantly unsettling. What was more unsettling was what he *could* see.

Ghostly wings on the back of that person across the street, for one. Random shadows flitting across the street - he guessed they must be dormant noise.

Then there were the Players. He could see six, just in the nearby vicinity - three sets of two. They were strangely insubstantial, though some of them seemed to almost glow, while others were so dim that he had to squint to make them out.

In the distance, a peculiar brightness caught his eye. Tezuka turned. There, two blocks away... a white cap. Echizen?

His eyes were watering and his head pounded. With a gasp, Tezuka released his hold on the Player Pin. The Players vanished from his sight.

Echizen! Tezuka gripped the pin again, but they were gone. His eyes were feeling strange. Reluctantly, he slipped the pin back into his pocket. It was a surprise that it even worked at all.

It was just an instant and from a distance, but he was sure that he'd seen Echizen. But that didn't make any sense. Why would Echizen be playing the Game again?

The bell trilled, and the tardy students were running through the Gates. Tezuka followed them, body moving on automatic. He greeted his classmates politely, but it felt like they were all very far away. His mind was on much more important matters.

Was Echizen really a Player? The question plagued him all through morning classes. They seemed boring and insignificant all of a sudden. He supposed that having a second chance at life changed his perspective some.

Arai was a Wall Reaper, Tezuka recalled. He might have information. To that end, he sought out the junior at lunchtime, cornering him where he was staring morosely out a window in deserted corner of the cafeteria. He hadn't been at the Tournament on Sunday, nor practice the day before.

"Arai."

The second-year jerked, clearly startled. "Tezuka-buchou! You made it through! That's great." He sounded visibly relieved, then frowned, hedging, "Um, I mean, in the Tournament... sorry I couldn't come."

"I'm here to talk about the Game."

"Yeah, it was something, or so the guys told me. Look, I'm really sorry but-"

"Not that game," Tezuka interrupted. "The one in the UG."

Arai looked spooked. "Hey... you remember?"

Tezuka nodded seriously. "Is that not supposed to happen?" Sanada hadn't given him a clear answer, but Arai might be more forthcoming.

He shrugged, shifting from foot to foot, trying to look tough and, in Tezuka's opinion, failing. "I... I don't think so. Though, there's a new Composer and Conductor, maybe that makes it different..."

"They're new?"

"Yeah. Came in only a couple of weeks ago. I think that was their first Game. Or sort of. You know... they were already Reapers, of course, so it wasn't their *first* game..."

"How does a Reaper become Conductor or Composer?" Tezuka asked.

"The Conductor is chosen, but to become Composer they've got to take out the previous one. It had been the same Composer for years though, because they were so strong, but then they came in and... just like that, we had a new Conductor and Composer. I mean, Conductors change every now and again, but Composers are on a whole other level of power, you know?! They hardly ever change, because most people ascend before they get to that sort of power - no one ever gets strong enough to challenge 'em."

Tezuka carefully filed that information away for future reference. "So in the Game... things have been unusual?"

"Yeah, in a big way. Look, I've been a Reaper for a couple of years... but I really don't have a lot of power, you know? That's why I was a Wall Reaper. But now all of a sudden I'm GM!" He ruffled his hair with both hands.

"You're Game Master?" Tezuka asked. It was all he could do to keep the incredulity out of his voice.

Arai scowled. "Yeah. It's just... things have been messed up since the Composer and Conductor changed. There's a lot more Noise, and it seems like I don't recognise most of the Support Reapers or Harriers anymore, and now we're running the game two weeks in a row..." He slammed his fist into his palm. "So I've got to prove myself as Game Master!"

Tezuka didn't want to comment, but the whole affair smelt very bad to him indeed. Sanada had lied to him about Echizen ascending for starters, and now Arai, who wasn't even a Harrier, was Game Master? Not to mention the high percentage of Rikkai players who were Reapers... "It sounds difficult. How do you maintain your life in both the UG and RG?"

"Eh? Oh well... you know, most Reapers can switch between the RG and UG at will."

Tezuka nodded. Arai was a giveaway - dead for two years, yet still attending tennis practice regularly.

"Yeah. So we only need to go into the UG when there's a Game. Even a lot of that can be done from the RG, like guarding walls... but higher-ranking Reapers usually just stick around in the UG."

"Any particular reason?" Tezuka asked.

Arai hesitated, looking uncomfortable. "It's... you lose a lot of your powers in the RG. Harriers don't usually like that, unless they've got a good reason to stick around the RG. And if you die in the RG that's it, you just become Noise, there's no ascension or second chance. And it's... it's risky for the Composer and Conductor to leave the UG for long periods of time, too."

It sounded like there was more to that, but the cafeteria was starting to fill up, and their privacy wouldn't last much longer. "One last

question... do you know why Echizen is still playing?"

Arai blinked. "Hey... that brat is playing again?"

"You didn't know?"

Arai shook his head, then bit his thumb. "Damn, that complicates things." After a moment, he said, "Look, Tezuka-buchou... with Game Master duties, I can't be spending too much time in the RG. I won't be at practice for the rest of the week." He was looking rather stressed all of sudden. He didn't look like he'd been sleeping as it was.

Tezuka almost wanted to order him there - if he was at practice, he couldn't be making trouble for Echizen. But he wasn't about to start messing with supernatural forces that already seemed to be in a precarious balance. So instead he stated, "You'll be running laps to make up for it later."

Arai groaned, but didn't complain. He headed towards the cafeteria exit, exchanged a brief word with Fuji who was just entering, and then went outside, kicking at the ground angrily.

Tezuka could understand - he too was troubled. Part of it was anxiety for Echizen - what happened there, anyway? They'd both finished the game. Sanada... He was disappointed. He expected better sportsmanship from Rikkai's vice-captain, but then, Rikkai had proven that their sportsmanship was rather lacking in the past. If they weren't winning the game, they'd change the rules.

For that matter, he was still having difficulty accepting that Sanada was the Conductor. It didn't sit right - they knew the boundaries of the Game, and Rikkai was nowhere near being within that boundary. Why would the masters of Seishun's UG be located so far away? And why would they spend so much time in RG if it were really so risky?

"Something on your mind, Tezuka?" Fuji asked merrily, sliding into the seat neat to his.

Tezuka nearly bit his tongue. "Nothing in particular."

...

Ryoma rocked back on his heels as the Noise vanished into thin air. Yanagi smiled, and Ryoma hid a shiver. Yanagi didn't really smile very often, but when he did it was downright *sinister*. "That's the mission then."

It was always a relief to see the red numbers disappear from his hand. "It wasn't very hard, though. There was nothing special about any of those Noise," Ryoma pointed out. It wasn't a third day sort of mission at all.

"Hey, you should be grateful the mission was so easy!" A voice called out.

Ryoma turned around. "Arai-senpai?"

That briefly startled the Wall Reaper. "What, hey - you remember me now?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, um... Yeah, well, say hello to your new Game Master!"

Yanagi took immediate interest. "You're the Game Master?"

"I thought you were just a Wall Reaper," Ryoma remarked blandly.

"I was, but this is my big chance for a promotion! With this chance, I'm going to show that Conductor and Composer what I'm made of, so I can't go easy on you! Got that, brat?! Don't go thinking you're big stuff just because this is your second time through!" Arai slammed his fist into his palm threateningly.

It was all hot air. Ryoma doubted he would have believed it even if he didn't have his memories back.

"Oh? Echizen, this is your second time playing? That explains a number of logical fallacies I was encountering in my hypotheses."

"I died a week ago," he muttered. "Finished the first time, but they're making me play again due to some fine print." He was sort of annoyed at Arai for letting that slip. Yanagi was probably going to pump him for even *more* information now.

"There are more rules we aren't aware of, then." Yanagi sounded thoughtful. For a second, Ryoma was almost grateful he was on his side. Yanagi struck him as the sort of person who would be good at dealing with things like that. But he couldn't quite bring himself to fully trust his new partner yet. Even if he knew that trusting his partner would be important in making it through the week, after Kirihsara's and Sanada's recent stunts he'd developed a bit of a prejudice against Rikkai players.

More of one, anyway.

The data tennis stuff didn't help either.

"So it's every week, then?" Yanagi asked.

"Of course not!" Arai spat; annoyed at being ignored. "Hardly ever happens! Reapers have stuff to take care of in the RG too, you know, and if we held it every week there wouldn't be enough players each round to make it worthwhile! And the Noise don't repopulate that quickly!"

"That is in line with my current observations," Yanagi agreed. "I merely wanted confirmation."

"Um, right. So. This is your warning! The Game's going to get a lot harder from here on in! That's a promise!"

For a second, Ryoma almost believed him. But it was Arai - tough talk was his speciality. He was a lot more worried about the serene expression on his partner's face.

Day Three, End.

Day Four

Day Four

Tezuka carefully walked the familiar streets. He was supposed to be in school but this was more important. Despite his recent trend of truancy, chances were everyone would just assume he was sick, or belatedly grieving for Echizen. It was sort of hard to grieve for someone who might still come back, but they didn't know that.

He couldn't activate the Player Pin for long without getting an intense headache. Something about frequencies, he guessed - it was probably the strain of looking into frequencies that were supposed to be closed to him. However it was enough to know that the Players were up and about. It was the fourth day, so their ranks had thinned considerably - he'd passed by Niou and Yagyuu on the way, and very carefully avoided eye contact - but the missions should still be giving them plenty of time. Which meant that this was his best opportunity to find Echizen.

Tezuka wavered outside of the ramen restaurant. He clutched the Player Pin, just for an instant, and the emblem flickered briefly in front of his eyes. He'd already known it was there, of course - they'd come to eat there a few times during that hellish week. Even if you were dead apparently you still got hungry, and there was a noticeable improvement in their ability to use psychs after eating, so they'd made a point of it whenever mission time allowed.

In any case, he had a better chance of finding Echizen here than he did by randomly clutching the Player Pin for a few seconds at a time. They'd be able to talk, too, and maybe he could finally figure out what went wrong.

He'd been prepared to stake the place out for most of the day but it appeared that his recent bad luck was due for a change. When he

entered a familiar white cap was visible in a booth in the corner of the restaurant.

It was hard to breathe as he approached the table. "... Echizen."

Echizen jerked. Tezuka was greeted with wide, surprised golden eyes. "Buchou?"

The senior was relieved. "You have your memory back."

The first-year slouched in his seat and looked away. "Yeah."

It was only then that Tezuka noticed who he was sitting with. "Yanagi Renji?"

"Oh? It appears that I am even more well-known than my initial estimates."

He was wearing a Player Pin. "I haven't heard any reports of your death," Tezuka said with a frown.

"... That's useful to know. I suppose no one has yet found my body," he replied calmly.

"You think you were murdered?" Echizen asked gruffly.

"I can come up with several reasons as to why my death might be undiscovered - it could be something as innocuous as a camping accident."

"There's nowhere that could happen in Seishun," Echizen remarked dully.

"Then I can rule out that possibility. Every piece of information is a clue."

The freshman looked thoughtful at that, then turned to him. "Buchou, are you going to sit down, or do you want to draw everyone's attention to us?"

"Ah, excuse me." He slid into the seat next to Ryoma. Tezuka was flustered, and he didn't like the sensation. Over the past week and a half it felt like the entire world had been turned on its head several times over. He'd been forced to contemplate things he'd never even considered, and then to adapt to circumstances so unreal sometimes he was still convinced it was a dream. Yet somehow it was a conversation in a ramen restaurant that left him the most off-balance.

"An introduction?" Yanagi prompted.

"Entry fee," Echizen mumbled under his breath.

Tezuka understood immediately, and his guilt spiked at the reminder. "Tezuka Kunimitsu."

"A pleasure to meet you. I find it curious that you don't seem at all surprised to come across friends who are supposed to be dead."

"Buchou knows about the game," Echizen said carefully, giving him a significant look. Tezuka read between the lines. Echizen didn't want to give away too much information.

"I see." Yanagi stood. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'd like to freshen up in the bathroom."

Tezuka blinked at the extraordinary display of tact. "Take your time," Echizen muttered.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Tezuka asked, "He's your partner?"

"Yeah. I didn't have the chance to be choosy." Tezuka could imagine that. The first hour of the game was the most dangerous, as Players rushed to form pacts so that they could stave off the Noise.

"Echizen... what happened?"

"Sanada pulled a fast one. After you were sent back the RG, said that only one person got to come back to life. Said that I could either

become a Reaper, or play the Game again."

"And you chose to play again?" Honestly, as deplorable as he found it, Tezuka had difficult faulting anybody that chose to become a Reaper. The Game was a harsh test, and the odds of at least some kind of survival were much higher as Reaper.

Echizen shrugged. "I made a promise, didn't I?"

"Oh." Tezuka didn't quite know how to react to that. Somehow, he'd separated the Echizen without memories and the Echizen with memories in his mind.

"I'm just going to be late, is all," he grumbled.

They sat there in silence for a long moment. Tezuka shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "The Game so far?"

"It's fine. I at least know what's going on now."

"I'm sorry," Tezuka said.

Golden eyes turned to him. "What for?"

Tezuka found himself unable to answer. Didn't Echizen know that his memories had been Tezuka's entry fee?

Was he relieved by that, or disappointed?

They fell back into silence. Yanagi was taking his time.

After a long pause Echizen finally admitted, "The Noise are getting stronger. But the first three missions were easy."

"And today's mission?"

Silence again. Echizen was looking everywhere but him.

"Echizen?"

"There's no mission," he eventually replied, so quietly that at first Tezuka wasn't sure that he'd heard right.

"No mission?"

Echizen shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "We've been awake for three hours already."

That was strange. Very strange. Normally the mission came within minutes of waking. "Have you met the Game Master yet?"

"Yeah. Arai. Can you believe?"

"I was surprised too." The puzzle was starting to slowly fit together in Tezuka's head, but he didn't have all the pieces yet. "Is it really okay? With Yanagi?"

"He's not as useful," The freshman complained. "He can hardly use any pins whatsoever. I have to do most of the work."

"That's not what I meant."

Echizen fidgeted for a moment before admitting, "I don't know. But we both want to get through it alive, so I guess it'll be okay." The words sounded as though they were forced out. "I mean, we've made it this far. And Niou and Yagyuu have left us alone, even if the other Harriers haven't."

Tezuka hadn't considered that angle. His concern eased some. In this case, a Rikkai player as a partner might actually be a boon.

"Buchou... why are *you* here?"

"I was worried."

Echizen flushed a little at that, before elaborating, "I meant, how did you know?"

Tezuka never had the chance to answer, as Yanagi chose that moment to make his return from the restroom. "Sorry to interrupt - Echizen, by my estimate if we want to avoid the Harriers, we should be leaving now."

Echizen sighed, hurriedly finishing off the rest of his ramen. "You know when they're coming?" Tezuka asked.

"He's already worked out their preferred patterns of movement," the freshman reported in a suffering tone.

"While I'm quite sure we can handle anything the Reapers throw at us, Echizen has indicated a preference for caution. I'm merely doing my part to help out."

Tezuka nodded. "Of course." Perhaps things would be fine with Yanagi after all.

Echizen stood. "I'm going. Sorry I couldn't make the Tournament, Buchou."

"It was nice meeting you, Tezuka. I only regret that I did not get the opportunity to speak with you further," Yanagi added.

Tezuka bowed slightly. "Echizen..."

He glanced back over his shoulder. "What?"

"... Don't get careless. You cannot lose."

Ryoma gave him a lopsided smirk. "Don't worry, Buchou. I'll definitely win."

...

The streets were a lot emptier in the middle of the day as people were working and students were at school. On one hand, it made it easier to spot Noise traps and Harriers, but it made the Players more visible to their enemies as well. Ryoma guessed that his status as a

'veteran' player made them an interesting target for anyone who wasn't Rikkai.

Ryoma scuffed his feet on the ground as they walked. He wanted to stay longer to talk to Tezuka - he didn't even have the opportunity to chew him out for hiding that stuff in the first week! - but Rikkai's data master had noticed that the Harriers would regularly swing past the stores with emblems, and if they saw Players inside they would lay in wait at the exit. On the second day they'd witnessed the grizzly aftermath of one such confrontation - a Player taken out by a trap, and her partner desperately trying to outrun the Noise. She didn't last very long. Ryoma was pretty good at picking up on Noise traps, but having the data master figure out the safest routes to avoid detection was the more reliable option.

"Turn left here - the golden pair will be coming along this road soon," Yanagi advised.

"Do you have to give them nicknames?" Ryoma grumbled. Yanagi had no idea - he'd just named the pair of Harriers after the excessive gold jewellery they wore - but the freshman was starting to feel like he was being hunted by his senpai.

"Yes," was the blunt response.

Whatever. The whole lack of a mission thing was making him nervous. He checked his phone again, just in case they'd missed the mission mail, but it wasn't like there was a timer on his hand. It was just paranoia. Karupin was relying on him. What was Arai doing?!

"Left again at the next intersection."

Ryoma barely turned the corner before his senses started going haywire. "Watch out!" The air warped around them, and Yanagi vanished from sight.

It was a Noise - but not like any Noise they'd seen before. Sure, they'd fought some wolf-like Noise in the past, but this one was

larger and completely black. That was off-putting. If anything, Noise tended to look on a whole as though they'd been splashed with brightly coloured paint.

Dark eyes surveyed them for a moment, then it charged.

It was *fast*. Ryoma barely leapt to the side in time, slashing out with a strike. Alarmingly it didn't seem to bother the Noise that much. It ran forward again with a growl. Ryoma hit it with blasts of lightning. It didn't stop, barrelling towards him at top speed. Panicking, he threw himself to the side at the last moment. Teeth scraped the edges of shoes.

"These Noise are uncommonly strong," Yanagi's voice floated through the air. For the first time, it sounded strained.

Ryoma stepped backwards quickly, barely avoiding the snap of gleaming white teeth framed in a midnight black jaw. With a practiced flick of his wrist he switched back to his katana pin, slicing at the Noise's throat. That did some damage - it yelped, tumbling to the ground in a fail of limbs - but it clambered back to its feet after only a moment with an unearthly growl. How much damage could it take?!

Frantic for something that would work, Ryoma grabbed the meteor pin, taking a risk and closing his eyes. Concentrate... *concentrate...*

The Noise crouched and sprung forward, dashing towards him at breakneck speed. Adrenaline surged through his veins. It felt like time was slowing down and everything was coming into sharp focus. Flaming rocks materialised in the air. The Noise continued heedless of the danger, growling and snarling, legs blurring as they pounded the ground, propelling it towards him.

Ryoma opened his eyes. They glowed golden.

The meteors were small, but pulled down by gravity and coming at high speed it only took a couple of strikes to finish the Noise off.

Ryoma's legs were shaking when he released the pin, and his senses buzzed strangely. How on earth did Tezuka use that psych all the time? His concentration must have been phenomenal.

It was though his strength left him. He dropped to his knees, huffing, as the Noise evaporated. Yanagi reappeared next to him a moment later, perfect bowl haircut messed up and a set of bleeding teeth marks in his arm. "You did it."

"Yeah." It seemed like he couldn't get enough oxygen into his lungs.

The data master gestured to his arm. "If you could..."

Ryoma tiredly fished for a healing pin and tried to calm his jittery nerves. "Sure." He wasn't great with the psych, but after a couple of goes the wound faded.

"Thank you." Yanagi rubbed his arm experimentally a couple of times, then stared at where the Noise had vanished. "That wasn't the work of Harriers, was it?"

"I don't know what it was," Ryoma admitted.

"You didn't see anything like it in your first week?"

He shook his head. The Noise just attacked out of the blue. It didn't make any sense - there were no Reapers around to summon it, and they had a pact. Noise shouldn't be attacking them without provocation.

"It appeared to be able to absorb a lot more damage," Yanagi mused. "For 75 percent of the Noise, one or two direct hits are enough."

Ryoma nodded to show he was listening. He was starting to feel more than just a little uneasy. First no mission, then a weird Noise turns up out of nowhere?

Yanagi made a sound of frustration in his throat. "The variables keep changing."

The freshman stood up, dusting the dirt from his knees. "We'll just deal with it."

That answer seemed to placate Yanagi. "You're certainly powerful if you can say that with confidence. It appears I was quite lucky when I was choosing my partner."

Ryoma crossed his arms. "Luck had nothing to do with it. You spied on as many Players as you could and chose the one that was trying to fight back."

Yanagi smiled. With his closed eyes, his smiles always reminded him of Fuji, and thinking about Fuji always gave Ryoma a headache.
"True, you caught me there."

"Glad to see you're so unworried. There's no second chance if we're erased, you know," he grumbled.

"Oh, I'm quite aware," Yanagi assured him. "Don't worry, I'm just as committed to survival as you are. There are too many things I'd like to know. How I died, just for starters."

That made two of them. He just hoped they could survive long enough to find out.

Day Four, End.

Day Five

Day Five

Ryoma opened his eyes and rolled his head to the side. Closed eyes and dark brown hair filled his vision.

"Good morning."

The freshman sat up so fast they nearly cracked heads. He scowled.
"Don't do that."

Yanagi stood back up, giving the first-year his personal space back.
"I was only waiting for you to wake up."

In the most disturbing way possible. He should have expected it - it was a very Inui sort of thing to do, and that was what Ryoma was basing most of his expectations of Yanagi on. "Che." He didn't bother getting up. The Rikkai senior selected a spot on the grass nearby, both of them eschewing the bus stop seats a couple of metres away in favour of the sunlight.

About ten minutes passed before Yanagi asked, "Should we get going?"

"It hasn't even been half an hour," Ryoma replied irritably.

"Considering all of the missions arrived almost instantly previously, the lack of one so far indicates an 80 percent probability of a repeat performance."

"We should wait longer, just in case," Ryoma argued.

"And waste as much time as yesterday?" Yanagi asked.

That was a good point. Most of the fourth day had been spent wandering around avoiding Reapers. But was that really so bad?

"What else is there to do when you're dead?" he scoffed.

"Watch people. Surely there are people in the RG you want to check on," he suggested pragmatically.

Ryoma did actually consider that. His house was within the boundaries of the Game - it would be so easy to just drop by and see how his family were coping with his death. It would be weird, though. His folded his knees, hugging them to his chest. Karupin wouldn't be there either.

There was Seigaku too, but Ryoma felt a bit funny watching his senpai when they couldn't see him. It was lonely. It was one of the worst feelings in the world when Tezuka walked straight past him without seeing him in the RG. "It's not really fair, since you can't remember any of the people you would want to check on," he reasoned. The excuse was a weak one, and he knew it.

"You knew me before - surely you knew of some of my friends?"

Ryoma shifted uncomfortably. "Like I said, we only met once or twice."

Yanagi didn't have anything to say to that. It was possible he suspected that the freshman was withholding things from him, but at least he didn't appear to want to make an issue of it. They had to work together to survive, after all.

A weird feeling tugged at his senses again, and Ryoma stood. Yanagi followed suite. "A problem?"

"Another black Noise," he answered, briefly touching his Player Pin.

They didn't get the chance to run. Again it was a familiar Noise, only black - a serpent this time. They fared a little better this round, but it took a good couple of minutes to take it down.

"Need any healing?" Ryoma asked. He'd been lying to Tezuka the day before when he said that Yanagi was useless. The truth was that Yanagi was a meticulous and powerful fighter, and frustratingly competent with psychs for a new player. His only real shortcoming was a lack of proficiency with restorative psychs, so Ryoma had to be a little more careful not to be injured by the Noise - or at least, not so injured that he couldn't focus long enough to patch himself up. But it wasn't an issue really, as Ryoma was a veteran player by now. Some of his pins had even been changing after repeated use, and his psychs were getting bigger, flashier and stronger. He might not really *like* Yanagi, but things were working out well enough.

"Fine here, thanks." Yanagi looked as composed and calm as ever. "These Noise are tough, though."

That was an understatement. Ryoma was still catching his breath. It was hard to dodge and use psychs at the same time. He did a quick scan. "There's more coming this way."

"Perhaps we should keep moving." Yanagi didn't wait for a response - he set out at a brisk walk in the opposite direction.

After a few minutes, they were in the clear again. They stopped in the street. "Now what?" Ryoma asked.

"Oh? What a surprise. I haven't seen you two for the past couple of days," a smooth voice said from behind.

Biting back a groan, Ryoma turned around. Just great. Niou and Yagyuu again. On ground level for once, even. "What do you want?"

"We're just doing our patrols, right, Yagyuu?" Niou drawled, hands on his hips and leaning forward with a leering grin.

Ryoma eyeballed Yanagi, who apologetically offered, "In getting away from the Noise, I lost track. Sorry."

He supposed he was expecting a bit much from someone who was missing his memories in that regard, anyway. Of course he wouldn't be able to predict his team mates' routes, especially since they'd been focusing more on avoiding the other Harriers. With a sigh, he turned back to the pair of Rikkai Reapers and repeated, "What do you want?"

"Just to chat; is that such a crime?" Yagyuu answered, the slightest of smiles gracing his lips.

"What about?" Yanagi asked, seemingly unbothered.

Yagyuu folded his arms. "Oh? You're not nervous at all?"

"Reapers aren't allowed to attack Players directly until the last day," Yanagi replied calmly.

Niou grinned. "We could summon Noise on you. Poof! Two more Players gone, more points for us!"

"I don't think so. You've ignored us once already, and you mentioned orders before. If you were interested in getting rid of us, you would have done so already."

"He's got us there, Yagyuu."

"So it would appear. But did you really expect anything less from Rikkai's data master?"

"Not much of a data master without his data, is he?"

"Hey, if you're not going to attack us, would you mind leaving us alone?" Ryoma interrupted.

"Aww, the widdle Seigaku freshman feeling left out?" Niou taunted.

Ryoma stepped to the side. "I just don't want to deal with extra Noise is all," he replied dully.

A black rhino-like Noise barrelled on to the scene, bearing straight down on the two Harriers. They barely leapt out of the way in time. The Noise simply reared and charged at them again. "The hell-?!"

"C'mon," Ryoma muttered under his breath, grabbing Yanagi's arm. "Let them take care of it."

In the chaos they quietly ducked into a side alleyway to watch the battle from a safe distance. Ryoma was mildly pleased to see that it took the two Reapers quite a bit of effort to erase the Noise.

"Fuck, Yagyuu, what was that?" Niou swore as the rhino vanished. "The Noise ain't supposed to attack us!"

Yagyuu looked as though he'd seen a ghost. He shakily pushed his glasses back up his nose. "Niou, get on the phone to HQ right away. We've got a wildcard interfering with the Game - someone's making Taboo Noise."

...

Tezuka knew that there wasn't a whole lot he could do to help Echizen. He was stuck in the RG, and while the Player Pin gave him a window into that world he could only keep it active for a minute or so at a time, and in any case he was just as powerless to influence it as Players were to influence the RG.

One thing he was capable of doing, though, was investigating Rikkai. Specifically, Yanagi Renji.

He'd taken to borrowing the classified section of the newspaper once his father was done with it in the morning and scanning the obituaries. After school, he went to the library to go through the previous couple of weeks of newspapers as well.

Eerily, he found his own death right there, printed on paper. Tezuka Kunimitsu, aged 15. Died from a single gunshot bullet through the heart. The killing apparently happened in broad daylight, but there

were no witnesses. It listed his profile and a few accomplishments - an excellent student, national junior high tennis champion, student council president, so on and so forth.

Strangely, even though it was still there on paper, nobody remembered that he'd died. It was convenient, certainly, but a little creepy. How was such a thing possible?

Mass imprinting.

That was the only explanation Tezuka could think of. There were limits to how the UG could influence the RG, that much was obvious, but if Players could make thoughts appear in people's heads with just a pin and a phone, wouldn't it be easy enough for the Composer - who was apparently on a different scale of power - to just imprint everyone in the area? To test, he tried to get the librarian to read the obituary to him, but she just slipped straight past any mention of his name without realising, even when he asked her to read it again.

There were bound to be opportunities for confusion, but people were good at reasoning out misunderstandings and improbable situations. After all, if he was right there, he obviously never died, did he? It was a mistake, or a coincidence, or a prank.

His fingers traced lightly over the kanji in the newspaper. Right underneath his was Echizen's obituary. Same place, same day, same cause of death. But Tezuka already knew that. He just didn't know how to approach it. He didn't know *why* .

There was an article on the second page about it as well. A shocking double-murder in broad daylight. Gun crimes were unusual outside of yakuza conflicts, and the fact that it had been an apparently random attack on two students caused extra controversy.

It wasn't random at all, of course, but Tezuka wasn't supposed to know that. Couldn't even *admit* to knowing that, because technically as far as he was concerned, it was as though it never happened.

Police stressed that they were following all possible leads and devoting all of their efforts to finding the killer. Tezuka supposed that if - no, when, he corrected himself sternly - Echizen finished the Game and came back to life, they'd have trouble remembering what they'd been working on the past few weeks.

There was no mention of a Yanagi Renji anywhere.

He hadn't expected there to be really - the news would have come through the grapevine at school quickly enough. Ostensibly, the next port of call was Inui. Tezuka waited until he was at home, then dialled the data gatherer's number.

There was a ring tone, then a click, then fumbling. After a couple of seconds, Inui's voice crackled in the speaker. "Tezuka?"

"Inui."

A pause. Then, "It's highly unusual for you to call me. In fact-" Paper rustled briefly. "There is a less than six percent chance you would do so outside of an emergency or team event." Another pause. "... Is something the matter?"

There was no point beating around the bush with Inui. "I need some information."

"Of course. If there's anything I can help with, I'm happy to oblige. What is it that you're after?"

"Have you spoken to Yanagi Renji recently?"

That apparently blindsided the data gatherer. He fumbled over his words for a minute before finally managing, "N-no, that is... not since the Nationals. Why?"

"Have you heard any news from him? Anything whatsoever from the past month?"

"Nothing. Is there anything in particular you're expecting?"

"I came across a disturbing rumour," he answered carefully.

Tezuka knew that if there was anything to get Inui moving, it was mention of a rumour. He was like a hunting dog when it came to them. "I'll look into it. I'll call you if I find out anything."

"Thank you." It was overly cautious on his part, but Tezuka already felt that he was elbow deep in something he only just barely understood. He preferred avoiding drawing Sanada's attention any more than he already had. None of the Rikkai players, Reaper or otherwise, would think anything strange about Inui trying to get in touch with Yanagi Renji - they were old friends after all.

There wasn't anything more he could do that day. Tezuka vainly tried to focus on his homework, then went downstairs to eat dinner with his family, and spent an hour afterwards practicing judo with his grandfather, who commented on his improved focus and concentration.

Five hours later, just as he was preparing to go to bed, his phone rang again. "Hello?"

"Tezuka?" Inui sounded breathless.

"Inui. Is something the matter?" He hadn't expected to hear back so soon.

"It's about Renji. I tried to get in contact, but there was no answer on either his home or mobile phone." He was audibly upset. "After that, I called all of his team mates. I couldn't contact any of the team members, but I eventually got a hold of one of his classmates. He's been missing school all week, and they assumed he was sick."

Tezuka knew where this was going, but had to ask. "And?"

Inui was speaking slowly and deliberately now - a clear sign that he was struggling to maintain his composure. "I became worried. So I went to his house. There was no answer, but a light was on in the

window. The door was unlocked, and..." Inui swallowed. "Tezuka, he's dead."

Tezuka knew that this was supposed to be a shock and that he really ought to have a reaction, but he'd already known that Yanagi was dead and wasn't quite certain what that proper reaction ought to be. "... What happened?"

"His parents were away from home, apparently. He was strangled. The police said that it looked as though he'd been like that for a couple of days already." Inui sounded shaken.

Tezuka closed his eyes. Another murder.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly. He hadn't expected Inui to find the body himself. If he'd known...

"It's all very shocking," Inui all but babbled. "I was.... at first, I was going to call the ambulance but the body was cold and then I thought the police but..." He trailed off, then tried again. "I told them that I'd wanted to get back in touch with him and became worried when I couldn't. I didn't tell them you were asking about it. But Tezuka..."

"I had nothing to do with it," he said, already knowing what Inui was trying to avoid asking. "My deepest condolences. The rumour I heard was tennis-related. In light of this turn of events, it's obviously untrue." A lie, possibly the most bald-faced lie Tezuka had ever told, but necessary to protect Inui.

"I thought so, just..." Inui sounded lost.

"You should get some rest. Have something to eat, and go to bed," Tezuka said sternly. "You're excused from practice tomorrow." He wished he could be more comforting, but that was more Oishi's speciality.

"Right... of course. Yes... Thank you, Tezuka." Inui hung up, mumbling to himself the probabilities of dying so young. Tezuka

would have to keep an eye on him to make sure he didn't try his hand at detective work. That could end very badly.

It was murder, after all.

There seemed to be a lot of that going around recently.

Day Five, End.

Day Six

Day Six

Ryoma stared dully at the pavement, not particularly interested in making small talk with Yanagi. His partner occasionally murmured something that sounded like an idle observation under his breath, but at least he didn't feel the need to share it with the world the way Inui did.

Eventually, though, he did speak up. "I don't believe a mission is coming today either."

They'd been awake for over an hour. Until this sudden dearth of missions, the mail never took more than a couple of minutes to arrive.

Ryoma didn't respond, staring at the dark clouds slowly scrolling in from the west.

"You should be relieved," Yanagi pointed out philosophically. "Fewer missions means less risk of erasure."

It could also mean that Arai was planning something big, probably for the last day. And the Harriers and Taboo Noise would still be picking off Players in the meantime. Heck, it was entirely possible the Taboo Noise got a hold of Arai - maybe that was why there were no missions. Ryoma still didn't respond.

There was a nice breeze. It was tempting to go to sleep, but Yanagi wasn't as good at sensing Noise approaching, so he had to stay alert. The game was *tiring*. You couldn't relax for even a moment, and he'd been at it for nearly two weeks now. But even if he could find somewhere safe to curl up for an hour, Ryoma doubted that he'd actually sleep. There were too many things to think about. Things

that were bothering immensely now that he actually had the chance to dwell on them for more than two seconds.

Was it all really just a coincidence? Arai apparently died and became a Reaper well before he'd transferred to Seigaku, and it sounded like Sanada, Niou and Yagyuu had all been dead for some time as well, but what were the odds of both he and Tezuka dying at the same time, and then Yanagi a week later? That was an awful lot of death in the middle school tennis circuit.

Yanagi and Arai and the others were probably coincidences, he guessed, but what were the chances of both he and the captain winding up dead at the same time? Even if he got most of his memory back, the circumstances of his death remained closed to him. He had some notion that he'd been talking with Tezuka after practice... about the tournament line-up or something. It was all rather fuzzy. They'd gone walking, and he'd stopped in at a convenience store to pick up some Ponta...

Outside the convenience store. It happened there.

"Hey... since we don't have any missions, mind going somewhere?" he said suddenly.

"Oh?" Yanagi perked up. "A change of heart? Where are we going?"

Ryoma stood up and started walking, leaving his partner to catch up. "Just something I want to check out."

Curiosity alone guaranteed that Yanagi would follow. He hid it a lot better, but he was just as much a slave to knowing things as Inui was.

Walking the streets was a lot more hazardous than it used to be. Wall Reapers still seemed to be on duty out of habit, but they were few and far between. And the first one they *did* come across was being attacked by Taboo Noise.

They chose a different path. Ryoma tried not to wince at the screams for help.

It was only fair that the Reapers knew what it was like, he reasoned. Being afraid of erasure all the time... they were just getting a taste of their own medicine. He should be grateful to whoever it was that was interfering with the Game.

They started at Seigaku, Ryoma carefully retracing his steps as he remembered them. Momoshiro had opted out of burgers and run off as soon as practice ended. He and Tezuka had been the last to leave, and were walking in the same direction - the freshman heading home, and the captain on his way to the sports complex nearby to get in some extra training, since he'd spent most of the afternoon practice ordering everyone else around and discussing the upcoming tournament with the coach. Hearing that, Ryoma decided to tag along for training as well.

They never made it to the sports centre. On the way Ryoma suddenly felt thirsty, and they stopped in at the convenience store for drinks. He bought Ponta, and Tezuka bought Calpis. That part he could remember clearly, but it started to get fuzzy when he tried to think about what happened after that.

It was different when he actually saw the convenience store, though. Something stirred in the back of his mind. Ryoma's steps slowed.

They left the convenience store. Ryoma cracked open the Ponta. They resumed walking, and turned the corner.

A voice. He hadn't heard what was said, but he recognised it, and turned to answer.

Ponta splashed on the ground.

Ryoma stared into empty space. A single gunshot echoed in his ears.

"Echizen!"

"Sorry, Tezuka. I really hadn't planned it like this."

He winced and grabbed his head. It *hurt* to think about it.

He *knew* that voice.

"Are you alright?" Yanagi asked.

Ryoma didn't answer, trying to force himself to think through the pain.

That was where his memories ended.

That was how he died. He'd been murdered.

Ryoma stared at the pavement. It was clean, but in his mind's eye, all he could see was bubbly purple soda mixing with crimson blood.

"Is there something about this place?" Yanagi asked.

"Yeah," he replied dully. *"I died here."*

The data master apparently had a decent sense of propriety, as he didn't say anything else.

Tezuka must have died right after. Probably killed by the same person. He would remember properly - he would have had longer to register, longer to react.

Ryoma rubbed at his chest. It felt tight all of a sudden.

"... Harriers will be coming along here in about ten minutes," Yanagi said quietly.

The freshman nodded to show he heard. *"... Let's go."*

"You don't need longer?"

He shook his head. He'd come here for answers, and only got more questions. There was no point in staying any longer, and in any case, thinking about it was giving him a horrible headache.

It was cloudy, which didn't help his mood any. It cast a dreary pall over the Game, taking the already gloomy outlook and turning it completely bleak. It felt as though a sort of hush had fallen over the entirety of Seishun as they cautiously walked the streets.

They rounded the corner. There were two Players, cornered by Taboo Noise. One was an elementary school kid, the other looked to be a high school freshman. "Make it go away!" the kid screamed, closing his eyes and crouching, frightened.

"Look out! Don't stop fighting now!" The high school girl yelled, running forward to grab her partner.

The Noise got them both at the same time. Ryoma and Yanagi quietly made their way in the opposite direction.

Another Wall Reaper fell, and they changed course again. They were near the street courts now.

"It's them again," Yanagi observed. He didn't need to stipulate who 'them' was - Ryoma knew just from the inflection of his voice that he meant Niou and Yagyuu.

He eyeballed the scene warily. The pair of Harriers were facing off with another rhino Taboo Noise. It looked like they were having a tough time of it.

"What do you think?" Yanagi asked. "Should we help them?"

His first instinct was to ask 'are you crazy?' but remembered that the pair of Harriers had essentially given them a free pass so far this week. "Let's do it. They'll hate it."

Yanagi smiled, and they ambled into the fray.

The pair of Harriers blinked, surprised at having their quarry taken from them. Yanagi very calmly launched an attack, Ryoma following up with a firestorm. Then lightning. Then force rounds. Then fire again.

"Hey, we can handle this ourselves!" Niou growled.

Ryoma ignored him, quickly stepping back a safe distance. This Noise could take an extraordinary amount of damage, but it was slow and lumbering when under attack. So long as Yanagi kept it distracted....

Concentrate!

It was over as soon as he summoned the meteors. Ryoma landed softly back on the ground as the Noise vanished.

"No need to thank us," Yanagi offered, brushing off his hands.

"We didn't ask for your help!" Niou was visibly annoyed.

"Oh? Looked like you were having trouble to me," Ryoma remarked with a smirk.

"You brat, just because-"

"Niou, they just assisted us in a tight spot. We should show them the proper courtesy," Yagyuu interjected.

"Screw that! We were fine!"

"Thank you for your assistance," Yagyuu said politely, ignoring his partner swearing in the background.

Yanagi was already behind them, poking at the ground. "What's this?"

"Don't touch that!" Niou snapped.

"It's a Taboo Noise refinery sigil," Yagyuu answered in a level voice.
"We were investigating when the Noise attacked."

Ryoma squinted, leaning around Yagyuu to get a better look. It was a large black diagram painted on the ground, filled with twisting shapes that reminded him vaguely of some of the patterns on the Noise.

"Oi, Yagyuu, we gotta go tell Sanada," Niou interrupted.

The bespectacled Harrier shook himself. "Yes, of course. My apologies, but we were in quite a rush before you arrived. Good luck on the final day."

"Try not to get erased," Niou added with a leer.

Ryoma watched them hurry away with a frown. Yanagi inspected the sigil for a moment longer, then joined his partner in watching the two Harriers depart. "They already know who made it."

"How do you know?"

"If they didn't, they would have stayed and watched the sigil to see who came by."

Ryoma tugged his cap down over his eyes. "Che. Makes no difference to us."

...

Tezuka glanced at the sky and quickened his pace as he left the street courts. It was probably going to rain, and he hadn't brought an umbrella.

It had been a couple of days since he'd seen Echizen, and there was a lot he needed to tell the freshman. He'd spent as long as he could at the ramen store again, but the pair of Players never showed. In the end, he had to concede defeat and head home. The game was probably over for the day - it usually ended well before sunset.

Still, just a look to check wouldn't hurt. There were things that Ryoma *needed* to know.

Tezuka stood out on the street, took a deep breath, and clutched the Player Pin.

A dark shadow materialised before his eyes. To his horror, it *turned*, eyes burrowing into him.

Abruptly, Tezuka stuffed the pin back into his pocket and backed away. He turned and jogged for the next three blocks, not daring to stop until the bad vibe in the air had cleared.

Was that *Noise* ? What kind of *Noise* was that, anyway? Normally *Noise* were indistinct in scans, only taking form when they were close by. He'd never seen one so *black* and somehow... *evil* before, either. He shuddered.

Tezuka stared at the Player Pin cradled in his palm for a long time. He had the feeling it wouldn't be very wise to use it anymore.

What on earth was *happening* in that Game?

Day Six, End.

Day Seven

Day Seven

The rain clouds had cleared. Ryoma blinked at the watery sunlight and stood. Blades of damp grass clung to his legs.

It was finally the last day.

"Good morning," Yanagi greeted congenially. "... Are you ready?"

As ready as he'd ever be. He just wanted *out* of this Game already. He wanted to get out and be able to talk to Tezuka and get Karupin back and eat something other than ramen and maybe actually wake up in a bed for once too.

It was odd, though. He should have been missing his friends and his family. But it was Tezuka that Ryoma was missing the most.

Forget odd - it was ludicrous. He should really be angry with the senior or something, because he'd spent an entire week pretending they were strangers and he even hid the fact that he knew how they both died. But it was difficult to hold on to those feelings of resentment. Every time they bubbled forth all he could think about was Tezuka healing him, or Tezuka holding his hand in the river, or the warmth of the pact, or the pain of seeing his captain in the RG and not being able to call out to him, or Tezuka skipping school to come to the ramen place because he was worried. He rubbed at his chest where the bullet had entered. It felt tight again.

Two phones beeped simultaneously. Ryoma blinked, breaking away from his thoughts.

A mission?

He frantically fumbled for his phone, flipping it open. There it was - the little received mail notification icon.

"Defeat the Game Master on the roof of Seigaku. Time limit, five hours."

After the past few days he'd almost forgotten how annoying those red numbers on his palm were. Ryoma stared at them numbly.

It took a minute for the mission to actually sink in.

He had to fight Arai?!

For a Wall Reaper, he was being awfully confident in issuing that sort of mission. Kirihsara wanted a fight, so of course he'd issued that edict, but Arai didn't seem as strong as Kirihsara. Even if Yanagi were completely useless as a partner they probably *still* could take him out. There was grandstanding and acting tough, but this was just stupid.

Unless Arai had something planned. He hadn't issued missions at all for the past few days, and as far as he could tell no one had seen him at all. Ryoma had even started to suspect that the Taboo Noise got him. But now it looked like his original fear about the Game Master's plans might be true after all.

There was no choice, though. It was the mission. If Arai wanted to take that risk, then they'd have to as well.

"Do you think it'll be a problem?" Yanagi asked as he closed his phone and slipped it back into his pocket.

"Depends. We're probably stronger than he is, but it's a bit weird." He cast a glance at the Rikkai player. "You ready?"

"I have been looking forward to this day all week, in fact. My current estimate... 90 percent chance of success."

"Che. Don't be stupid. It's a hundred percent," Ryoma scoffed.

"At that show of confidence, I'll readjust my predictions to 95 percent."

No Wall Reapers stopped them on their way to Seigaku. Ryoma kept an eye out for any other Players, but wasn't surprised when he didn't find any. The Taboo Noise would have taken out any that the Harriers missed.

The school loomed ominously in front of them. As they were walking through the gates Ryoma did briefly consider that maybe he should be making more preparations for the endgame, but dismissed the notion. With how often the rules of this game seemed to change, making plans any sooner than ten seconds before executing them was a waste of time.

It was eerie walking through Seigaku's halls, climbing the staircases, making their way through the throngs of students who couldn't see them. It was only two weeks ago that Ryoma had been in classes like the rest of them, sleeping through English and doing his homework at the last minute. It seemed a lifetime ago. It was so... mundane, even though it was familiar. It was hard to even imagine himself doing it anymore.

It was dangerous sort of thinking, right before a battle. Ryoma clenched his teeth as they climbed the last staircase to the roof.

There was the door leading out onto the rooftop. Technically students weren't allowed up there, but considering that the roof was fenced in, it was rule that was rather poorly enforced. Even Tezuka hadn't called him on it when he'd found him up there a couple of times. Absently, Ryoma wondered if Tezuka was in class downstairs with the rest of the students, unaware of the battle for existence that was about to occur above their heads.

He paused as he rested his hand on the doorknob.

"Hey, you know... I didn't really trust you at the start."

Yanagi was quiet for a second, then answered, "I know."

"It's just... before we go out there... I trust you now," he mumbled in a rush. "You've been a good partner. I might not have made it, otherwise."

"My position is much the same."

Ryoma felt relieved, now that he'd said it. He didn't bother with any other form of pep speech - neither of them needed it. A twist of the doorknob, and they stepped out onto a wide expanse of sunbathed concrete.

The wind whipped across the rooftop, creating a chilling contrast to the warm kiss of sunlight. It was quiet up on the roof, with the distant chatter of students barely audible and the roar of traffic muted.

Arai stood on the far corner of the roof, hand clutching the fence as he stared out over the school grounds, looking every part the delinquent skipping classes.

"Hey."

He jerked around at the greeting, nearly stumbling in his haste to re-orientate himself. The second-year looked visibly surprised to see them there. "You- What are you doing here?"

"We're here for the mission, of course," Yanagi replied.

"Mission? I didn't issue a mission!" He narrowed his eyes.

"We've got one right here," Ryoma drawled, flipping his phone open. "Defeat the Game Master on the roof of Seigaku'."

Arai visibly recoiled, seemed to get his grounding again, and took up a fighting stance. "Oh, so that's how they're going to play it, is it?" His eyes darted around. "I knew it! I knew it was going to turn out like this all along! Ever since the new brass came in, this Game has been broken - the UG is getting messed up! But I'm ready! I'm not

going down like the rest of them!" He swept out his arm, and all around him Taboo Noise materialised.

" You were the one making the Taboo Noise?" Ryoma choked out in disbelief.

"That's right! And you all learnt, didn't you?! Don't be so cocky just because I'm a Wall Reaper! I've been playing this Game longer than all these ring-ins! I know how it all works, how the UG is supposed to run!" He punched his palm with his fist a couple of times for emphasis. "It's about time you get a lesson in humility!"

Arai was oversensitive about such matters, but he also had a small army of Taboo Noise at his disposal, so Ryoma didn't feel like arguing. Arai was the sort of guy who understood action better than words, anyway.

The air warped around them, Yanagi vanished from his sight but not the rest of his senses, and the fight was on.

Arai seemed intent on staying back at least. Two Taboo Noise came for him at once, and Ryoma nimbly darted away, leaving a trail of fire in his wake before switching to his katana pin. The transparent blade that was clutched between his fingers enveloped his whole hand now, and he slashed repetitively at the black wolf Noise snapping at his feet - forehands and backhands and smashes one after another. The Noise evaporated, but seconds later a small herd of black Frog Noise took its place.

There was a jarring in his senses, and the pact seemed to waver for just an instant. Ryoma touched the healing pin. "Thanks," Yanagi's voice floated through the air. It was easier to heal mid-battle than after, sometimes.

"Mada mada dane," he muttered, using psychokinesis to throw another wolf onto the pile of frog Noise. With the time bought, he focused, and a blast of meteors wiped them all out in one strike.

All of a sudden, a flash of colour entered the battle. Ryoma blinked, stepping back and barely avoiding a tan fist. "Cocky brat, showing off at a time like this?"

So, Arai was in on the fray now too. He hit the Reaper with a long stream of lightning. Arai swore, and threw a Noise at him using psychokinesis. Ryoma ducked, slashing at it as it went past, then ran for the Game Master, pins in hand, but had to abort the attack when a Taboo rhino lumbered into view, swinging its massive head around and knocking Ryoma clear off his feet.

He landed on the ground with a jarring thud, but rolled back to his feet, slashing blindly into space while he reorientated his senses. Another frog Noise dissipated into nothingness. Arai swung some more punches at him, which Ryoma somehow managed to dodge. The Wall Reaper didn't even have any other psychs to attack with?

A burst of fire was enough to get Arai to back off, nursing a burnt arm with a fierce scowl. Ryoma used the opportunity to drag down a crow Noise with psychokinesis and finish it off. Slowly, the army of Taboo Noise were whittled down, and it was just Arai left.

Ryoma advanced on the Wall Reaper, pins at the ready. Arai held out his hand. "Hey, no, wait, they're your enemies t-"

Suddenly, the Wall Reaper paused, an odd look on his face, and stumbled back. "No way..."

"Arai-senpai?" Ryoma asked, lowering his hand.

He was getting insubstantial. Alarmed, Ryoma ran forward. "Arai-senpai!"

Arai was there, and then he wasn't. Gone. Erased.

Yanagi appeared next to him. "That was close." Ryoma couldn't stop staring into empty space; paralysed by shock.

It had been easier with Kirihara, because Ryoma hadn't remembered him at the time. And even then, Rikkai's up-and-coming ace was clearly off the deep end and fighting to kill. It hadn't been like that at all with Arai.

It was the Game. It was all because of the stupid Game.

There was a flash of light, and he was back in that eerie room filled with mirrors.

"Congratulations on making it through the week. In this case, twice."

Ryoma clenched his fists, staring at the ground. Sanada again. "You've had your fun. Give Karupin back and send us back to the RG."

"There are some problems with that."

Golden eyes snapped up to glare at the Conductor. "What? I completed the game. *Twice*."

"And I'm sorry to inform you that due to certain events, this Game has been declared void. The Game Master went rogue and ceased to issue missions, and then even committed the gravest of infractions by creating Taboo Noise."

Ryoma felt like he was choking. It wasn't... he couldn't...

"I did not get the impression that making Taboo Noise is a simple thing to do," Yanagi observed. "That a mere Wall Reaper did it... surely he had outside help."

"He was the source," Sanada answered curtly, "That is most important. But even though the Game is void, we are grateful for your assistance in eliminating him, and so the Composer has generously decided—"

"A moment," Yanagi interrupted. "Before you continue with that, I have a request."

"And that is?" Sanada asked.

"I would like you to make me a Reaper."

Ryoma whirled on his partner. " *What ?*"

Yanagi's expression didn't even falter. "This was my intention all along, wasn't it? I'm only sorry it took me this long."

"What about your life? Didn't you want to go back to the RG and find out how you died?" Ryoma demanded. He couldn't believe that after all they'd been through that week Yanagi would so quickly give up and choose to become a Reaper. They hadn't even heard what the Composer's offer was yet!

"In regards to that matter, I believe I already have a fairly good idea. You see, so many of my friends are making names for themselves in the UG... it seems only reasonable that I join them, doesn't it?"

"Are you saying that you committed *suicide* ?"

"Oh, I had some assistance in that quarter, right, Conductor?"

Sanada nodded.

How... He didn't have his memories! "How..."

"I lost all of my data at the start of the game. That meant losing all of my memories," Yanagi reasoned calmly. "But upon gathering information throughout the course of the Game, certain probabilities made themselves known to me."

Sanada smiled grimly. "As the Composer predicted."

Unbelievable. It felt like the rug had just been pulled out from under him. All this time... Yanagi had been quietly gathering information, making conclusions... and he'd arrived at *this* ?

Ryoma was angry. It wasn't often he became angry, but he couldn't believe this. It had been *hard* for him to trust Yanagi, especially when the ranks of his enemies seemed to mostly be filled with Rikkai tennis players. His only solace had been that they were in the same boat.

Except that they'd never been in the same boat. That was the key difference. Yanagi *wanted* to be there.

"Niou, Yagyuu!" Sanada barked.

The pair of Harriers slunk out of... *somewhere* ; Ryoma couldn't see where they might have hidden in the room. "You called, Conductor?" Yagyuu asked with a sly smile.

"Renji is joining the ranks. Please take care of it," he instructed.

Niou's smirk was a perfect mirror of Yagyuu's. "About time."

It had been a ploy from the very beginning. The only thing that *hadn't* gone according to plan was Yanagi teaming up with him.

Ryoma flinched as he felt the pact break. It felt like a receding tide, sluggishly dragging the breath from his lungs. Yanagi's face twitched briefly, but that was the only outward indication of him feeling the severing of the connection. "My thanks, Echizen. You were a very useful partner. Best of luck to you."

The three Rikkai players left the room. Sanada turned back to him. "Now... there's the matter of what we're going to do with you."

Day Seven, End.

...

Footsteps clattered on a concrete path, mindless chatter filling the air as people walked past. Traffic rumbled on the street nearby, drowning out the twitter of birdsong and rustling of the wind.

Ryoma stood up, dusted his the dirt from knees, and stared dully at the bus stop timetable.

'You have 7 days.'

He was starting to suspect that Sanada wanted him erased no matter what.

Seven Days Left

Seven Days Left

"Now... there's the matter of what we're going to do with you."

"Karupin," Ryoma insisted stubbornly.

"I'm sorry, but as the Game was not completed, your entry fee cannot be returned."

He shouldn't have been surprised after everything that had already happened. Ryoma tugged his cap down over his face. He wasn't going to give Sanada the satisfaction of seeing him beg or plead or cry. But Karupin...

"Though the Game was invalid, due to your assistance in eradicating the source of the Taboo Noise, the Composer has made a generous offer. You may play the Game once more under one condition... this is the last time you are allowed to play. There will be no future chances."

Ryoma stuck his hands in his pockets so that the Conductor wouldn't see him clenching his fists. "And my entry fee?"

"Already collected."

The phone beeped insistently. Woodenly, Ryoma opened the mission mail.

"Go to Seigaku. Time limit: 3 hours. Fail, and face erasure."

He clamped down on the swelling bitterness and set out towards Seigaku at a run. He needed a partner. He'd show them. Sanada, Yanagi... all of them. He'd play their stupid Game so well they'd have no choice but to give him back his life.

It was too late for Karupin, but he was damned if they were going to get him too.

There didn't seem to be anybody with a Player Pin around. Golden eyes scanned the crowds of students and people on their way to work frantically, searching for anyone that seemed out of place. "Hey!" he called out. "Hey, are there any Players around here?"

Nobody answered, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the air shift slightly. Noise.

"Anybody?!"

Frog Noise again. Ryoma grit his teeth and ran away.

He *needed* a partner. He was a sitting duck without one. What was he supposed to do - just run away all week? But if even one mission required him to defeat a Noise, he was done for.

Where *were* all the Players? They should have been moving towards Seigaku - it was just common sense! But he hadn't seen a single one yet!

That was when he realised.

His entry fee had been all of the other Players.

...

Tezuka hurried to school for morning practice. The game had finished yesterday, and he still had no idea what had happened.

He'd spoken to Inui that morning, and the data-gatherer had still been mourning Yanagi's death, hit extra-hard by the loss of two friends. The fact that Echizen's phone was still disconnected left him unsettled as well. His fingers tightened around the Player Pin in his pocket.

"Tezuka!" Fuji called, jogging up to walk alongside him.

"Fuji," Tezuka greeted coldly.

"Hey now, don't be like that. What did I do?"

He wanted to answer, but it would just make him sound crazy. Tezuka frowned and stared at the ground while he walked.

"Actually, Tezuka, I was hoping to run into you here."

"And why is that?" Tezuka quickened his pace.

"I seem to have made a teeny tiny little mistake."

Ominous words, given the sort of fire Fuji liked to play with. "Then you should fix it."

Fuji smiled cheerily. "Well, that's the idea."

Tezuka stopped walking and started to turn. "What do you--"

Bright blue eyes stared up at him as a cool metal object was pressed into his hand. "You can right the wrongs that have been made. I'll be relying on you."

Tezuka started to respond, but Fuji skipped ahead. "I'll tell Oishi you said to start practice straight away!"

Confused, the senior didn't move until his friend was a couple of blocks away. Slowly, he looked down at the object held in his hand.

A gun.

Tezuka nearly dropped it in shock, but managed to collect himself in time. Where on earth did Fuji get a *gun*? His thoughts sped ahead at neck-breaking speed, the puzzle pieces fitting together, filling hole after hole after hole. A horrible suspicion began to occur to him.

With shaking fingers, Tezuka reached into his pocket and withdrew the Player Pin. He took a deep breath and clutched it. The world

shimmered briefly in front of his eyes.

Noise. Everywhere he looked, all he could see was Noise. Tezuka started walking, heading towards the school again.

In the distance, there was one bright form. His breath caught when he spied a white cap, and then Tezuka was running to catch up.

It was definitely Echizen. He was trying to shake off a small herd of Noise.

Tezuka hadn't seen Echizen for a couple of days, but even through the hazy, interference-filled images provided with the Player Pin, he didn't look well. There were deep bags under his eyes, little jagged tears on the edges of his clothes, and his expression was decidedly harried.

Obviously there had been developments. Bad ones. Yanagi hadn't come back to life, and by the looks of it, Ryoma was playing *again*.

Except... something was off. Tezuka couldn't quite put his finger on it.

He clutched the Player Pin harder, ignoring the painful buzz behind his eyes from staring at a frequency locked to him for too long. It was the first day of the week, wasn't it?

If so... why couldn't he see any other Players?

On the first day there were always lots of players. When he'd been in the UG it hadn't been very obvious, since the only real way to determine player status was either by their pins or scanning. Back in the RG, however, they were incredibly obvious, as they literally looked like glowing, transparent ghosts walking amongst the rest of the crowd.

Today, Echizen was the only ghost.

If Echizen was the only ghost...

If there were no other players with whom to make a pact...

Tezuka looked down at the gun in his hand.

The game was set up to doom Ryoma. He didn't know how he'd done it, but somehow, Sanada had arranged the game so that Echizen was the only Player. It was completely rigged. It was a set-up designed so that there was no way for Echizen to avoid erasure.

Tezuka raised the gun to his head, clicked off the safety, and took a deep breath.

He couldn't let that happen.

A single gunshot echoed through the streets.

...

Ryoma winced, bracing himself for the impact. There was nowhere else to run.

At that moment, warmth flowed into him like a river of light. It felt like being hugged by feathery wings. For a second, he thought that maybe this was what being erased felt like, and didn't feel so bad about erasing Kirihsra or Arai anymore.

"Echizen! Echizen, are you alright?!"

He opened his eyes again. It still *looked* like the UG. "... Buchou?"

"The Noise!"

Suddenly remembering himself, Ryoma grabbed his pins, and blinked when a firestorm taller than he was erupted after using his fire pin.

The Noise didn't last long, and the others nearby were suddenly not so interested in him anymore.

Somewhat dazed, he turned. Brown hair, brown eyes, glasses, and a face that could be carved out of stone. He certainly *looked* like the captain. "... Buchou... how...?" His gaze swivelled to the Player Pin Tezuka was holding. "You're...?"

"Never mind that, are you alright?" he asked, grabbing him by the shoulders.

"A pact..." Ryoma mumbled, still in shock. "Buchou... but all the others Players were... how..."

Tezuka's face was slightly red. "I... When I saw what was happening I couldn't just sit by and let it happen. You needed a partner. So I..."

Ryoma eyes widened. "Buchou, you *killed* yourself?"

Tezuka looked away. "... Yes."

Unbelievable. Why on earth would Tezuka do that for him? Why would he kill himself just to rescue him? Why would he put himself *willingly* through the game *again* ?

Ryoma shook his head. "Buchou, you shouldn't have done it."

"You were about to be erased!" he protested.

His shoulders slumped. "Buchou... I think I'm going to be erased anyway. This is my last try."

Tezuka grabbed him by the arm. "Echizen! Don't talk like that!"

He shook his head again. "That was the condition. If I don't make it this time, that's it. I don't get to play again."

"Then you'll simply win. That's your only choice."

"They're just going to get me on some sort of technicality," he mumbled. "Probably for partnering with you. You've entered the game illegally, without an entry fee. They'll be trying to erase you."

Tezuka was quiet, then suggested, "Perhaps you'd better fill me in on what's been happening."

Ryoma checked the red numbers on his palm. Seigaku was only a block or so away. They had the time. "Yeah, okay."

They found a bench half a block away and sat down. It took him a good minute to collect his thoughts, and then slowly Ryoma started recapping the relevant parts of the previous week in a wooden voice. Arai's threat. The Taboo Noise showing up. The mission to erase Arai. Yanagi's defection, and Sanada's final offer.

Tezuka remained silent, listening intently, until he finished. After a moment, he offered, "Inui said that the police thought that Yanagi's body was moved after his death. I assumed he was killed in Seishun, then his body moved to his house. Which meant..."

Ryoma nodded grimly. "Yeah."

"Sorry. I tried to warn you in time, but I couldn't find you anywhere."

"No, it's okay. We had to move around a lot to avoid the Taboo Noise." Ryoma pulled his knees to his chest. "What about you, Buchou?"

Tezuka explained everything he'd learnt about the game from Sanada and Arai, as well as everything he'd learnt from Inui about Yanagi's death. Ryoma absorbed it all quietly. When the senior was finished, he glanced at his hand. "We should finish the mission."

"... Right."

As they stepped through Seigaku's gates the timer on Ryoma's hand disappeared. He stared at his palm for a long moment, then turned to Tezuka again.

He was grateful to Tezuka, he really was. He was maybe a little mad that the senior had thrown away all their hard work from the first

week by killing himself to help him out in the game again, but he was also sort of glad for the presence of that warm pact that thrummed in his veins even now.

There was one thing that had him genuinely irritated, though.

"Buchou... I have one more question to ask you."

"Yes?"

"Did you see who killed me?"

Tezuka didn't answer.

... Six Days Left.

Six Days Left

Six Days Left

Ryoma blinked. They were standing by the bus stop again.

It was the next day? He hadn't fallen asleep, though - or, at least, he didn't remember waking up.

He turned back to Tezuka, intent on demanding a response to his question, but was interrupted when his phone beeped. Irritated at being forced to wait for an answer yet again, he made to flip it open, but Tezuka caught his hand.

"Echizen, I've been thinking... let's ignore the missions."

"What?"

"You said it yourself, didn't you? That there was no way to pass the Game. But there is one way."

Ryoma was confused. "What do you mean?"

"We take Seishun back. End the coup."

"... Ha?"

"Thinking about it logically, the current Composer and Conductor must have belonged to Rikkai's Game, and they've taken over Seishun's for whatever reason."

Ryoma's eyes narrowed. "You're suggesting...?"

"We stage a coup of our own. Ignore the missions and go after the Composer. If we defeat the Composer, we can fix everything."

Ryoma frowned. "I thought the Composer was super-strong."

Tezuka quirked an eyebrow. "And that has stopped you before?"

... The senior had an irritating habit of always being right. "But if we don't complete the missions, won't we be erased?"

"I would like to see them try," Tezuka said grimly.

Ryoma lips started to curl into a smirk. "Heh." This was probably what he liked best about Tezuka. Here was an impossible wall to overcome, and the captain was just going to stare it down and make it run laps. "Where should we start?"

Tezuka didn't reply, staring over Ryoma's shoulder with a stony expression.

"I have to say, this scenario wasn't anywhere within my predictions."

He *knew* that voice. Ryoma slowly turned around and glared. " *You* ."

Yanagi Renji stood before them, looking much the same as he did the week before, with one very important addition - a pair of black skeletal wings sprouting from his back.

"Hello again, Echizen. And you've defied everyone's predictions Tezuka. Entering the Game illegally."

Tezuka didn't miss a beat. "I have a Player Pin."

"And that in itself is a mystery I would like to unravel," Yanagi agreed. "Regardless, that isn't why I'm here right now."

"So why are you here, then?" Ryoma all but growled.

"I came to deliver the mission, of course."

He choked. "You're the Game Master? But you just became a Reaper!"

"I learn quickly," Yanagi assured him.

"Game Masters deliver the mission in person now?" Tezuka asked.

"They do when Players don't look at their phones."

This was just grand. "So, what's the mission?" Ryoma asked. Knowing Yanagi, it was going to be something ridiculously convoluted and complex with an impossibly short time limit. It didn't hurt to ask, since they were just going to ignore it anyway.

"It's quite simple," Yanagi stated. "I'm going to hide in a certain place, and you have to find me. The time limit... six days."

Six days?!

"You're not going to change location for the whole six days?" Tezuka asked carefully.

"As I said."

Ryoma was suspicious. It was too easy. Granted Yanagi was a brand new Reaper, but he was also an incredibly slippery character. On the other hand, this sort of mission was perfect for giving them the chance to find the Composer. No one would notice that they were essentially ignoring the mission until it was too late.

As though sensing what he was thinking, Yanagi calmly added, "You'd better not waste any time. By my estimates, Echizen doesn't even have that long."

Suddenly nervous, Ryoma asked, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I think you have maybe four... five days at the most until you disappear from the UG."

"... Disappear?" Ryoma wanted to laugh and wave the empty threat off for what it was, but something about it rang true with him. What was it? Had he forgotten something? Another rule that Sanada neglected to tell him?

"There's one other small piece of business to take care of before the mission starts," Yanagi continued. "Tezuka, if you intend to play the Game, there's the matter of your entry fee to consider."

Still reeling from Yanagi's previous announcement, Ryoma almost missed seeing the blood drain from his partner's face.

"You can't," Tezuka said, voice low. "It would defeat the whole point."

He already knew what his entry fee would be?

"It is supposed to be the thing that is most precious to you," Yanagi insisted.

"It's not fair. You've taken too much from him already."

That sentence set off even more alarm bells. "What are you talking about?" Ryoma demanded, thoroughly confused by this point and intensely annoyed by the sensation.

Yanagi turned to him, the picture of calm and serenity. "Tezuka never told you?"

"Told me what?"

"Don't!" Tezuka ordered, sounding a little desperate now.

"His entry fee for the first game - it was your memories."

Ryoma sucked in a breath. His memories... they were *Tezuka's* entry fee?

That meant... He turned his gaze to the captain who was looking away, cheeks faintly pink. "Buchou?" he whispered.

"I'm sorry." The words were so quiet that Ryoma had to strain his ears to make them out.

His mouth was dry. Turning back to Yanagi, he said, "Then the first time..."

"Your entry fee. You can't guess what it was?"

"Tennis," Ryoma whispered. He'd lost tennis. It made sense - even without his memories, he shouldn't have been that bad at the sport. He always picked up things quickly, but spent an entire game without winning a single point. Not to mention that hollow emptiness he'd felt when he played. All week something had been missing, something significant.

It was a good thing he didn't have his memories then. If he'd known what he'd lost, it might have been enough to make him give up altogether.

"You were a tricky one, apparently," Yanagi informed him. "A week without tennis, and you didn't value it so much anymore. It was your oldest companion next, wasn't it? The Himalayan cat. And with that entry fee gone, what was left?" Yanagi tapped the side of his head. "It was your promise, to meet with a certain someone back in the RG. Hence, your entry fee was your ticket out of the Game - all of the other players."

"That's unfair," Tezuka protested with a frown. "For the entry fee itself to guarantee failure."

"But it didn't, did it? An illegal player entered."

"If I hadn't-

"I find that there is little point in dwelling on the probabilities that did not occur," Yanagi dismissed. "In any case, the removal of Echizen's memories now would invalidate his own entry fee. I have consulted with the Conductor on this matter, and he agreed to an alternative with sufficient weight."

Ryoma tensed - on one hand nervous, and on the other deeply curious.

"It seems only fair that this time, Tezuka... *your* entry fee will be tennis."

A strange sort of expression came over Tezuka's face as Yanagi snapped his fingers. Horror coursed through Ryoma. He *knew* exactly what it felt like, understood that desolate emptiness that came with losing something that was almost on the equivalent of *breathing*.

"You can't!" Ryoma blurted. "Tennis is-"

Tezuka shook his head, hand hovering over his shoulder, but never quite touching. "It's fine."

"In that case, I'll be going. Use your remaining days wisely," Yanagi advised. "Oh, and one more thing Tezuka... I'd be careful. You may have been admitted to the Game, but you still entered illegally. A notice has been put out to all of the Reapers to erase you on sight." He clicked his fingers, and vanished in a flash of light. Ryoma was left blinking the spots from his eyes. No Reaper had used that trick before.

Tezuka let out a deep breath. Ryoma glared at the spot where Yanagi had been standing mere moments before. "What's the point of even taking an entry fee if they're still going to treat you as an illegal player?!"

"Don't worry about it. I said it's fine."

It *wasn't* fine. "But what's it all for if you don't get tennis back? Do you want to go back to RG without it?" Ryoma demanded.

Tezuka wouldn't meet his eyes. "You went through it too, didn't you? Tennis isn't the most important thing to you anymore. So long as you're alive, that's what counts, doesn't it?"

He didn't have anything to say to that, even though he still wanted to argue. It was true. Tennis wasn't the most important thing anymore. But it was worse than that. Ryoma had lost Karupin - even now, he understood how horrible it would be to return to the RG and face that. To return to the RG and face a huge component of your life missing, something which you based your entire vision of the future on...

Tezuka was stronger than he was. So much stronger to be able to look that possibility in the face and still take the risk. "We'll complete the mission as well," he muttered.

"We should be looking for the Composer-

"We'll do them both at the same time," Ryoma interrupted with a glare. "Or find Yanagi, and *make* him bring us to the Composer."

Tezuka apparently couldn't argue with that logic. "Then we'll scan the entire zone."

"You don't think he'd have a way of hiding from that?"

"You did raise a good point earlier - he is just a beginner," Tezuka observed. "And you're good at scanning."

Ryoma stuck his hands in his pockets and mumbled, "But he learnt about being a Player really fast. It won't be that easy. And he probably has his memories back now, too."

"We'll simply have to rise above his data." Tezuka was always pragmatic about such things. When Ryoma didn't respond, he asked quietly, "Are you sure you're okay with it? You were partners for a week, after all."

It had left him a little shaken, admittedly. For most of the week he'd been suspicious of Yanagi based on the sole fact that he was from Rikkai, but they were in the same boat, and gradually, he'd come to trust him. That betrayal of trust at the end of the game stung, and the

fact that he was now their opponent stung even more. Ryoma didn't trust easily to begin with, and having that thrown in his face after having a pact all week... "Where should we go first?" he said, ignoring the question.

Tezuka thought on it. "We should start with all of the major landmarks, and work our way down to the more obscure ones. Seigaku first, then the street courts, then the river, and so on."

Ryoma nodded. "We'll do the river first then." With Yanagi it would make more sense to take the route he expected them to take then mix it up. He started walking.

There was at least one source of relief - now that Arai was gone, most of the Taboo Noise seemed to have vanished as well. There was the odd straggler here and there that would attack them, but they made good time. Considering that the river was right on the edge of the Game's boundaries, perhaps even excellent time.

It was peaceful and tranquil at the River - or, as Ryoma had started to think of it after it very nearly drowned him, Seishun's glorified drainage pipe. Nobody was around. Nobody visible, at least.

Ryoma carefully scanned the area surrounding the river, but nothing stood out. "Next place."

Tezuka nodded, and started leading the way. He stopped and looked back when Ryoma didn't follow. "Echizen, is there a problem?"

Maybe it was just the river, and things that had happened there, but Ryoma had to say *something*. "Buchou... about the memories thing," he started haltingly.

"I'm sorry," Tezuka repeated, looking genuinely contrite.

"No... it's just... don't be," he mumbled, embarrassed. "It... I'm sort of happy." He glanced up, meeting a pair of thoughtful brown eyes.

After a moment Tezuka smiled, really *smiled*, and it stole Ryoma's breath away. "Thank you. And don't worry. We're definitely going to take Seishun back."

For just that moment, Ryoma could honestly believe it was all going to be okay.

... Five Days Left

Five Days Left

Five Days Left

Tezuka was briefly disorientated before finally realising that they were at the bus stop *again*. Echizen swore, and Tezuka gave him a disapproving look. "We're already a day down!"

"There's still five more days. We'll be fine." Keeping a level head seemed to be important in this situation. It was up to him - Echizen's nerves were obviously strained after the stress of the previous week. The freshman wasn't the sort to lose his cool under pressure, but Tezuka assumed he must have a breaking point.

"They could whittle the whole week away in no time at all if they only give us a couple of hours a day!" Echizen seemed almost frantic.

"Are you really so surprised, after everything that has happened so far?" Tezuka pointed out.

"No," he grudgingly admitted. "Seigaku next, right?"

Tezuka nodded solemnly, following a couple of steps behind as his partner stormed ahead. Even in this serious situation, a smile wanted to tug at the edges of his mouth. Echizen hadn't been angry about the entry fee at all. Tezuka was still keenly embarrassed over the whole affair, but his guilt had now eased and his burden lightened.

He didn't regret pulling the trigger. Not even for a moment. Looking back, he didn't understand where he'd managed to pull the resolve from - he had no guarantee that he would be able to pass into the UG, it was just as likely that he'd turn into Noise or ascend - but things had worked out.

Considering who gave him the gun, he shouldn't have doubted, but that was a whole barrel of things to think about on its own.

Echizen swore again, stumbling backwards and cradling his arm. "A wall?" Tezuka guessed. He looked around. There weren't any Wall Reapers in sight. "Seigaku is this way."

The freshman glared at the wall, then raised his fist and charged straight at it. Tezuka's eyes widened. "Wait-"

With a grunt and a flash, Ryoma tore straight through it. He looked back with a smirk, even as the air sparked. "What are you waiting for, Buchou?"

The senior stared. When did Echizen become that strong? He tore through that wall as though it were tissue paper. Was it just all that time in the Game?

Tezuka suddenly felt cold, the good feeling he'd been enjoying mere moments before evaporating with the realisation.

The Game existed to purify young souls. Players who completed the Game either returned to the RG, became Reapers, or ascended.

This was Echizen's third time playing the Game.

How much longer could he play until he just passed into a higher frequency and was lost to them forever?

His stomach lurched. If Echizen ascended...

They'd reached the school. "Buchou, hurry up," Echizen said impatiently, standing by the school gates. "I've already taken care of the wall."

The fact he could say it so flippantly troubled him - but possibly not quite as much as it annoyed the Wall Reaper standing behind him.

"Echizen, watch out!" he called in warning, running to catch up.

The freshman carelessly glanced over his shoulder. The Wall Reaper cracked his knuckles. "This is my promotion for sure!"

The air warped. Tezuka couldn't see so much as sense what Echizen was doing, but grasped a pin and focused. Their surroundings seemed to darken slightly as the air was slowly sucked into a growing pinprick of darkness.

To his surprise, though, Tezuka wasn't even able to fully form the gravity well before the Reaper vanished. It was over that fast.

When he returned to UG, Tezuka noticed that many of his psychs were a great deal more powerful than the first time around. But Echizen had become a *lot* stronger. And Tezuka didn't think he even realised.

Normal space returned. Echizen looked bored. "Che. Mada mada dane."

"Was erasure really necessary?" he asked.

The first-year tugged his cap down over his eyes. "He would have erased *you*, Buchou."

Tezuka didn't say anything more. They headed into the school in silence. It was lunchtime, so most of the students were either out on the grounds or mingling about the halls, filling the building with endless chatter that resembled the cacophony of scanning in a large crowd.

They walked through each building, invisible to the throngs of students, Echizen scanning as they went. They walked past the freshman trio, then Arai's friends, and even past a suddenly much-older looking Ryuuzaki-sensei without missing a beat. Life continued around them, with their passing more a matter of gossip for most than mourning. It made it all seem so fleeting and pointless, somehow.

Echizen's steps faltered when they neared the wing the seniors held their classes in. "Something's weird here."

Tezuka glanced at the class number. It was his homeroom. His stomach flip-flopped briefly, but he pulled open the door.

It was all of the seniors of the tennis club, clustered together in the centre of the room. Ryoma let go of the Player Pin. "Che."

Oishi was at the centre of the circle - he looked a wreck. "I mean, even if he didn't say anything, I knew how he felt, but to think that he'd go that far..."

Eiji was sitting next to his doubles partner, eyes watery. "First Ochibi, now..." He hiccuped.

Inui was staring into space, mumbling a jumble of numbers and words to himself. The senior could hear his, Echizen's and Yanagi's name all in there.

Tezuka felt his first twinge of regret for pulling the trigger.

Kawamura was slouched in his seat, staring into space. "It didn't seem like Tezuka - right there in the middle of the footpath."

Fuji was... Fuji was looking at him.

Tezuka turned around, checking to see if there was anything behind him, but it was just a map of Japan on the wall. He faced forward again. Fuji was patting Eiji's back. "There there. I'm sure they're together in a better place."

Echizen snorted, then winced. "He's half right, at least. Buchou, can we go yet? Yanagi's not here, and it's a bit..." He was massaging his temples as though he had a headache. He probably did - Tezuka could feel a faint distortion in the frequencies that would probably be a lot worse to Echizen, who was a great deal more sensitive when it came to scanning and irregularities in the UG. It was probably what attracted him to the room in the first place.

"Sure, let's go." He waited for Echizen to leave first, then glanced back at Fuji. The prodigy was looking at him again.

"You owe me an explanation later," he said.

Fuji smiled. "Good luck."

Eiji sniffled. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Just a charm for the dead."

That set the redhead off again. Feeling a bit awkward at being faced with the misery his own actions caused, Tezuka retreated to the hallway with his partner, and spent a moment cleaning his glasses while he regained his composure.

"See? Now they have to mourn two deaths," Echizen mumbled.

Tezuka didn't give that comment the dignity of a response. "One thing I find unusual is that Yanagi appears to still be dead as far as the rest of the world is concerned, even though he's a Reaper now."

"He probably won't sort that out until the game is over," Echizen dismissed.

Tezuka thought for a moment. "You don't think that perhaps he might be hiding in the RG? Beyond the walls?" Rikkai was in a completely different prefecture after all. It would be the one place they *couldn't* find him.

"He'll play by the rules," Echizen stated confidently. "He'll be tricky, but he won't leave the boundaries of the Game."

Considering that they'd been partners for a week, Tezuka trusted Echizen's assessment on that matter. "Besides," the freshman continued, "No one seems to be saying anything about Arai-senpai either."

That was true. But then, Arai had been absent a lot, so it was quite possible that no one had noticed yet. How did it work for Reapers who were erased?

Now it was Tezuka who was starting to get a headache. There were so many issues and rules to keep track of, *on top* of finding both Yanagi and the Composer. In that respect, Yanagi was an excellent choice of a Game Master. Patience and cunning could be an equal match for power and experience.

They left the school empty-handed and a great deal more stressed. "The shopping complex next?" Tezuka suggested.

Echizen nodded moodily. Obviously seeing his senpai in such distress over his death bothered him. Tezuka could relate. He certainly hadn't set out to make his friends sad with his suicide... it was just - at that moment, Echizen had been in trouble, and it didn't seem like anything else mattered.

Tezuka also knew that saying this would make absolutely no difference to the freshman, so kept quiet as they headed towards their next destination.

"What did he mean, anyway?" Echizen asked suddenly.

The question caught Tezuka by surprise. "Pardon?"

"The bit about disappearing in five days. Three, now." His voice was low, but to Tezuka it felt like he'd shouted. His partner's alarm at the abrupt passing of the days now made more sense.

Tezuka didn't think Echizen knew it consciously, but it was obvious that he believed Yanagi's prediction, even he didn't understand the reasoning behind it. He'd been in a visible rush all day - something that didn't mesh with the freshman's usual character at all.

It was a question that he didn't want to answer, but it was also something that the first-year deserved to know. He'd obviously been

mulling it over. "I think," Tezuka said slowly, "That he meant you would ascend. Your frequency would get too high to remain in the UG any longer."

There was a long silence as Echizen absorbed that. Tezuka could almost see the gears turning in his head. He stopped walking. "But... what would happen to you then?"

Tezuka didn't answer; there was no need.

Ryoma folded his arms. "I won't. I won't ascend."

"Are you sure you'll even have a choice?" Tezuka asked.

"I'll just *make* a choice."

That was perhaps what Tezuka liked best about Echizen. If you told him something was impossible, he would immediately set about tearing it to pieces just to prove you wrong.

"We'll hurry," Tezuka declared, "So that you don't have to."

... Four Days Left

Four Days Left

Author's Note: One of my personal favourite chapters. Has a little bit of everything, and some questions start getting answered. Thanks for all the reviews so far! They are always wonderful motivation to post on time and do that little bit extra proof-reading.

Four Days Left

They looked around. It was the river this time. Ryoma recoiled.
"Another day down already?!"

Tezuka, as always, looked completely unruffled. Ryoma was starting to suspect that he was just as surprised, but shock just shut down his facial expressions.

"Where's he hiding, anyway?" There was no time. They hadn't even found a clue as to where Yanagi was hiding or the Composer was staying - surely the Composer had to at least be in the UG for the duration of the game?

"We could check the indoor sports complex next," Tezuka suggested.

The indoor sports complex. It was in an area they hadn't visited a lot throughout the course of the previous games, so it was possible Yanagi chose there.

"Perhaps we should run," Tezuka added.

Ryoma nodded, and they set out at a quick jog. He scanned as he went so that they could cover more territory. Snatches of thought whisked by him, parts of words and feelings that contradicted what was being said out loud. There were a lot of Noise floating about, but he was content to ignore them. A couple even tried to pick a fight, which was a bit weird, but easy enough to take care of.

He almost wished there were some stronger ones. Ryoma had been feeling the intense desire to blast something for the past couple of days, and Noise were the perfect outlet. He was frustrated - angry with Yanagi for betraying him, angry with Sanada for twisting the rules, and angry with himself for failing Karupin.

Angry that Tezuka put himself in harm's way for him.

Oh good, a wall. That would do. Ryoma tore through it, ignoring the tingle that ran up his arms on the first contact before the barrier crumpled.

Ascending... the first time he heard the term, he dismissed it as inconsequential - it was just a convenient explanation as to why there didn't seem to be any elderly people in the Game. He never thought that it would apply to him. The only choices in his mind were erasure and returning to the RG.

As time in the Game wore on, though, he found himself becoming less concerned with the RG. He should be missing his friends and family more, shouldn't he? He *did* miss them, and *did* want to see them again, but they felt very far away. It felt more like homesickness than grief.

He wasn't playing the Game for himself anymore. He was playing it so that *Tezuka* could return. And somehow, that thought scared him.

"We're here," Tezuka said.

The sports complex. Memories of that tired emptiness while playing a tennis match swam in front of his eyes.

Tezuka would be feeling that now. No, it would be *worse*, because he'd remember what tennis was *supposed* to feel like. Ryoma hadn't known it, but he'd been dead in more than one way that week.

Tennis might not be the most precious thing to him anymore, but it was still important.

He scanned and tugged on Tezuka's sleeve.

"Where?"

He pointed.

"Looks like we were found out." Yagyuu and Niou stepped out from behind the bushes that lined the side of the sports complex. He was a little disappointed it was the Harriers and not Yanagi, but then, Yanagi probably chose a more effective hiding place than a bunch of shrubs.

"You suck at hiding," Ryoma declared.

"Echizen."

"What? It's *true* ." Why on earth the captain insisted on being polite to their *enemies* baffled him.

Niou grinned, licking his lips. "We *wanted* to be found. We're pretty annoyed at working three weeks in a row because of you!"

Another battle then. Ryoma smirked, pins at the ready - he'd actually been anticipating this, ever since the first Wall Reaper attacked them. Yagyuu snapped his fingers, and in a flash, both Tezuka and Yagyuu had vanished from sight. That was interesting. Apparently Reapers could fight the same way as Players if they wanted.

Niou was just standing there with his hands in his pockets. Looked like it was up to him to make the first move. The katana pin slid between his fingers, air shimmering as it activated. Ryoma dashed forward with a decisive swing.

He didn't expect to meet resistance.

The white-haired Reaper grinned, pressing against his psych-blade with one of his own. "What, thought you were the only one who could use this?" He reached out with his spare hand. Ryoma ducked the grab, rolling backwards, and immediately followed up with a barrage

of force rounds. Bursts of energy exploded around the Rikkai trickster, who dodged them fluidly, seeming unbothered. A mere moment later it was Ryoma who was dodging an identical barrage of force rounds.

"Che, how annoying," he muttered under his breath, dashing in for another go with a blade, but Niou parried his hits easily, and his larger size meant that Ryoma always had to back off. He switched to psychokineses next, throwing a handful of rocks at the Reaper. They were all intercepted by a garbage can, and clattered off the metal noisily.

"You figured it out yet?" Niou called, sidestepping another barrage of projectiles and returning them in kind. "You can't win!"

He was copying his psychs! Hesitantly, Ryoma slid the meteor pin back into his pocket. If Niou avoided it and returned that psych in kind, it would be bad for him. He wavered indecisively for a moment.

"That's right. I'm like a mirror. Anything you send my way, I'll send it straight back at you. You'd better choose your attacks wisely. Puri."

Talking so big when he was just a copycat?! Ryoma narrowed his eyes, switching to his lightning pin. Lightning streamed from his palm. Niou hopped to the side, and an identical stream of lighting shot back at him.

Ryoma winced, caught off balance, and threw up an arm to shield his face. The lightning struck his forearm. To his surprise though, while the psych burnt, it wasn't that bad. He lowered his arm tentatively.

His psych was much more powerful than that. He didn't have to get hit by it to know that - what it was now made the first week look like he was shooting off static sparks. It should have flayed the skin off, not just left a tingling red burn.

It wasn't a straight-out copy, just the illusion of one. The psychs weren't as powerful, nor was Niou as familiar with them. They were form, not function.

In that case...

Ryoma slid his whirlwind pin into his palm. Niou lazily glanced down at the tornado forming beneath his feet, and hopped away. "You can't out-sneak me!" he taunted.

Wind started to pick up in the nearby vicinity, but Ryoma didn't bother moving. "Not good enough."

"Fuck!" The Reaper swore as his jump nearly brought him straight into a twisting pillar of fire. He stumbled backwards, struggling to regain his footing, eyes widening as the flames *curled* towards him, dragged by the tornado behind him. "Fuckfuck fuck!"

His opponent disappeared into the flames. Ryoma held the psych up for as long as he could, but it was hard keeping two psychs going at once. Exhaling, he released the pins, switching back to lightning.

He blinked. It wasn't Niou who emerged from the smoke - it was Yagyuu. Or at least, he thought it was. You could never be too sure with this pair.

Yagyuu adjusted his glasses. "It looks like a week spent with Yanagi left its mark."

Ryoma adjusted his cap - it had been knocked slightly askew in the fray. "Mada mada dane."

This time, his opponent didn't wait for him to attack first. Ryoma was immediately dodging beams of psychic energy fired in quick succession. He stopped, lightning pin at the ready again, but was forced to hop to the side and resume running again as Yagyuu launched another volley. He was *fast*.

He was quick on the draw with psychs now - a lot faster than what he used to be. But Yagyuu was snapping off the beams ever faster. He was accurate, too - Ryoma had to run and dodge at full speed to avoid getting hit, and even then the tips of his shoes were getting singed.

Maybe close-range... Ryoma pulled out his katana pin and activated it, trying to run closer, but was forced to retreat under Yagyuu's ceaseless assault. It didn't look like that would work either. What was he supposed to *do* ? Just run around?

He grit his teeth, skidding to a stop, and gripped his fire pin. *Focus* . *Don't dodge. Just focus.*

A beam struck him in the leg, and then the arm. It stung like hell, but it was a small price to pay. Another one struck him in the stomach, and Ryoma doubled over, but didn't loosen his grip. *Concentrate!*

An enormous pillar of fire sprung up in front of Yagyuu. His eyes widened, then an instant later, he was engulfed in flame.

Ryoma dropped to a knee, cradling his now-twice burnt arm. Tezuka was suddenly by his side again, and both Niou and Yagyuu standing across from them, sooty and clothes slightly ragged.

"What the fuck, Yagyuu?!"

"We're retreating," Yagyuu answered calmly.

"Retreating?! I had him! I was going to-"

"Get blown to bits," Yagyuu stated matter-of-factly.

Niou scowled, hands hooked behind his head as he looked up into the sky. "Fine." He turned his back on them and walked away, kicking at the ground angrily.

Yagyuu watched him go. "My apologies. It's nothing personal. At least, not for us. We're just making the best of a bad situation."

"How did you die?" Tezuka asked. They never received an answer before.

Yagyuu adjusted his collar, tidying his singed clothes as best he could. "I'm sure you'll understand that dying is an unpleasant business. It's difficult to recall the details, and I don't have much of a desire to do so." He turned to follow after Niou, but paused.

"You've noticed it, haven't you? There's something wrong with this UG."

Ryoma didn't answer, but he *had* noticed. Even Arai had pointed it out, way back in the second week. It was hard to pinpoint it, but things were *off*. The Noise were too populous after three weeks of Games, and pockets of them were almost as aggressive as the Taboo Noise had been. The negativity in the RG was growing more prevalent in the scans.

"It's only going to get worse unless things are sorted out." At that, Yagyuu shrugged as though he didn't much care for his own statement, adjusted his glasses, then hurried off to catch up with his fellow Reaper.

"We're just going to let them go?" Ryoma demanded, even as Tezuka turned his attention to healing their injuries.

"They lost. They were just doing their job. There's no need to pursue the matter."

It was awfully forgiving of the captain, but then, Tezuka was always a bit of a martyr. He was probably even thinking it was his fault for entering the game illegally, never mind all of the rule breaking that was probably happening on the Conductor's end. And Yagyuu had dodged the question of their deaths again, too.

It did, however, remind him of something he'd briefly forgotten about amidst everything else that had happened over the course of the past few days.

"Next place," he said, standing and striding off without waiting for an answer. Tezuka followed quietly.

No more Reapers stopped them in their path, and Ryoma took great delight in ripping down another wall, wishing he'd know that he could do it earlier. Although it was possible that the pact with Tezuka had something to do with it - it was hard to imagine being able to summon the necessary energy with Yanagi.

The streets were a lot emptier in this area, with most people either at work and school. It made scanning easy, since there were fewer thoughts floating around to distract him.

Finally, they arrived at their destination. Abruptly, Ryoma stopped walking and turned to face his partner.

Tezuka's face was pale. "Echizen..."

"I haven't forgotten, Buchou," he said.

They were standing in front of the convenience store.

"You can't hide it from me. You were there. You saw," he said levelly.

"I..."

"They killed you too, didn't they?" he demanded, voice cracking.

Tezuka stared at him for a long moment. It felt like he was being weighed. "Are you sure you want to know?"

What kind of question was that? *Of course* he wanted to know! He'd wanted to know ever since the second week! Who *wouldn't* want to know the identity of their killer?

His expression was obviously answer enough. Tezuka glanced off to the right, eyes glazed as though looking at a memory. "You have to promise you don't do anything reckless when you hear."

"Fine," he agreed, impatient.

"... It was Fuji."

A gunshot echoed in his ears. With the knowledge, it was as though the last of the fog had lifted.

Ponta splashed on the ground. Pain. The world was tilting, falling. The edges of the sky grew dark. Sound grew muffled.

"Echizen!" Tezuka's scream was strangled. Then... "Why?!"

"Sorry, Tezuka. I really hadn't planned it like this." He couldn't turn his head to see who was speaking, but the shoes looked oddly familiar.

He was vaguely aware of arms around him, but even that sensation was fading. Tezuka's voice sounded a lot closer though. "Echizen. I'll call an ambulance - just hold on. Hold on, Echizen." He'd never heard the senior sound so panicked before.

The gun clicked. "I really am sorry. I didn't think you'd be here too. But I guess this doubles the odds."

"Fuji-"

Another gunshot echoed through the streets. Then, silence.

"Fuji? It was Fuji ?" Ryoma couldn't believe it. He'd known the voice, knew that he recognised it, but never suspected...

Tezuka didn't say anything else.

Ryoma narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to kill him."

Tezuka shifted uncomfortably. "Actually... I think he may already be dead."

Perhaps it was just the endless stream of shocks being delivered to his system that made this one not quite so earth shattering. "I didn't see any of the wings that the other Reapers have, though."

"I think he might be a different case," Tezuka said. "It's just a hunch."

Figured. "Why did he do it, though?" Everyone in the club privately feared the possibility of Fuji murdering someone one day, but Ryoma was pretty sure he hadn't done anything recently to spur the action. Did he accidentally knock over his racquet or insult his brother or something? He racked his brain, but his conscience came up clear. No, it was clearly just that Fuji was a bastard.

"I'm not sure either. But... he gave me the gun."

"Ha?"

"It was Fuji who gave me the gun. That I killed myself with." Tezuka looked faintly embarrassed.

If possible, Ryoma's irritation with the blue-eyed prodigy increased. Considering he was his murderer, that was a pretty impressive feat. "Che. Intruding on other people's business again." He stuck his hands in his pockets.

He wanted to go track Fuji down and make him talk, and possibly unleash a few psychs on him if they'd work, but he'd promised Tezuka that he wouldn't do anything rash. And knowing didn't really change their current situation any. They still didn't know where Yanagi or the Composer was, and they were quickly running out of time.

The air was cleared, at least. Ryoma could understand why Tezuka had been reluctant to speak on the subject now. He knelt down near where he remembered falling, fingers tracing over the concrete. Tezuka crouched next to him, resting a hand on his shoulder. Unconsciously, Ryoma closed his eyes and leaned against the senior, taking comfort in his presence.

Half of Rikkai were Reapers, his former partner was now the Game Master, he'd lost Karupin, and now it turned out that his murderer was one his senpai. But Tezuka was still there. Tezuka hadn't let him down yet. Ryoma was still mad at him for killing himself... but selfishly, he was a little happy that he had.

If they hadn't died, then maybe in time they would have...

... Three Days Left

Three Days Left

Author's Note: Warnings are mostly for this chapter. This is what I affectionately refer to as the 'payoff chapter'. Hope you enjoy.

Three Days Left

Tezuka jerked and rubbed at his eyes. The convenience store was gone - they were in front of the bus stop again. Another day gone?

Echizen swore. Tezuka didn't bother scolding him this time. He felt a bit like swearing himself.

They were still crouched down, Echizen leaning against him. Suddenly embarrassed, Tezuka stood. After a moment, the freshman followed suite with a scowl.

He was relieved in a way to have aired his suspicions about Fuji. He hadn't wanted to add to Echizen's stress, but if anything were to happen to either of them... it was better that they both knew.

"Street courts next," Echizen said. It was one of the few places they hadn't checked.

The street courts. Tennis. A lump formed in Tezuka's throat, but he ignored it. If they both survived, he was willing to pay that price. He would manage even if his entry fee never got returned.

"We should stop and get something to eat on the way," he suggested. It didn't seem like food was necessary to function, but the sensation of hunger was getting distracting. Echizen must have agreed, because he didn't complain about losing time. They still set out at a jog though. Even if they were mostly jogging to cover more ground in less time, there was something therapeutic about the action. It was an act associated with the normal and routine - a small shred of life from the RG they could replicate.

Tezuka *needed* normal and routine now. The air had changed somehow with the clearing of that last secret. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the atmosphere was definitely different between them. Echizen seemed to be deep in thought while they jogged and scanned, and while that wasn't so surprising - there was lots to think about, after all - the little looks he kept giving Tezuka out the corner of his eyes were a little disconcerting.

The senior tried to ignore it and just focus on the matters at hand. He checked that they had enough money for ramen. The storeowner greeted them with a smile when they entered - they'd been regular customers for the past few weeks. It wasn't really through choice, but that small connection with the RG was comforting.

Tezuka ordered for them both without thinking, then turned to apologise when he realised what he'd done. Echizen waved it off. "It was what I was going to order anyway."

He'd known that, of course, but it was still presumptuous. Tezuka settled into his seat to wait in silence, Ryoma a heavy presence next to him. Why were they sitting on the same side in a booth?

They'd eaten there plenty of times before, but all of a sudden it felt like a date.

Their ramen arrived, and Tezuka ate his so quickly that he nearly choked. Echizen smirked, and Tezuka wondered why he was so nervous all of a sudden. It wasn't *actually* a date. For it to be a date, you had to ask the other person out. Or something. Tezuka wasn't too sure of the specifics.

They finished, he paid for the meals, and then it was on to the street courts.

They were on a hunt, but it was feeling *far* too much like a date. Even though they were running.

The street courts were empty - it was mostly popular with students, and school was still in session. It only took Echizen a moment to confirm that their quarry wasn't there either.

"Where to next?" he asked. He wanted to keep moving. If he were moving he wouldn't be thinking about what life would be like without tennis or grand conspiracies or the way his partner's eyelashes fluttered and lips parted slightly whenever he was scanning.

"Can I have just a moment Buchou?" Echizen asked. His voice sounded a little strained.

He'd been deliberately avoiding looking directly at the freshman since the ramen restaurant, but when Tezuka glanced at him he was looking rather tired. Why was he-?

Of course - he was scanning and running at the same time. "I'm sorry - we're making good time. We should take a break." He caught Echizen by the elbow and led them to a clear spot on the grass under the shade. Ryoma sank gratefully to the ground, taking off his cap and rubbing at his temples. "I could take over scanning for a while, if you'd like."

"It's okay," he replied gruffly. "Just need a few minutes to clear my head."

"Right." Tezuka didn't scan as much, but could empathise after his attempts at scanning in the RG. After a while it felt like your head was filled with cotton and your senses would go a bit haywire if you didn't take a break. In the UG the effect wasn't nearly as prevalent, but it looked like prolonged scanning could eventually produce a similar result.

They sat there in comfortable silence for a few minutes. It was quiet, and there was a nice breeze. The grass was soft, and the tree provided a good backrest. It was the sort of situation Tezuka wished he could just relax and enjoy the atmosphere in. If the circumstances

were different, he would have liked to take out a good long book and read the afternoon away.

Eventually Echizen broke the tranquillity. "We've never really done this before."

"What?"

"Just sit, like this."

"Hm. I suppose there was never the opportunity," Tezuka mused, looking up at the blue sky filtered through green leaves. It would have been nice, he thought, to do this with Echizen in the RG.

"There was never opportunity for a lot of things." The voice beside him was so small and wistful that Tezuka turned to check that it was actually Echizen who said it. He was surprised to see golden eyes staring up at him, a lot closer than he thought they'd be. And they were getting even closer.

Tezuka's brain shut down at about the point when he felt soft lips brushing the edge of his mouth.

"... Echizen?"

Ryoma withdrew slightly and glanced to the side, embarrassed. "It's just... I never did any of that stuff while I was alive," he mumbled in a rush.

Tezuka blinked, still somewhat dazed. "... Pardon?"

The freshman was blushing bright red now, staring fiercely at the ground. "You know... it just didn't seem fair."

"Nothing about this Game is fair." It wasn't the answer that Tezuka wanted to give, but it was all he was really capable of at that point in time. Mentally he was still in the process of tripping over himself. It was something he had given thought to ever since he'd discovered what his entry fee for the first week was, but he never expected *Echizen* to act on it, and certainly not so suddenly, either!

Echizen made a sound of discontent in his throat, scooting closer to him so that they were sitting knee to knee. "Don't you regret it? All the things you never got to do?"

"If we win the game, there will still be time." Echizen's hand had found its way to his knee, and Tezuka was having difficulty processing that.

"Buchou..." Ryoma's voice was breathy and inviting. "Should we...?" There was no question as to what exactly it was that his partner is proposing.

Tezuka stood, certain that he should be doing something, but unable to really think about what that something was without a bit more distance between the two of them. Echizen, Ryoma - he wasn't sure which name he was supposed to use anymore - was not having any of that and leapt to his feet as well, stepping towards him.

"Buchou-

"No, we shouldn't-

"You want it," Echizen insisted stubbornly. "Because of your entry fee. I know I'm not wrong."

Tezuka's mouth was dry, and his head felt like it was spinning. "No, you're not wrong, but it's too fast-

Ryoma - it *had* to be Ryoma now - all but tackled him; arms wrapped around his waist and face buried in his chest. "Buchou, we could get erased at any point. I could disappear. It might be our only chance."

Tezuka wasn't exactly a romantic, but he still envisioned things going a little more traditionally. A proper confession, then maybe holding hands, then cuddling... working their way up. It wasn't even an issue he thought would come up for a couple of years. He was protective of his personal space, and figured that it was something that would wear down naturally over time with the right person. He hadn't

counted on how easily Ryoma slipped inside it, and how natural he felt there. "We're both still too young-"

Ryoma's hands fisted in the back of his shirt. His voice was muffled by the fabric. "We're already dead. How much longer do you want to wait?"

It was a compelling argument. God help him, he *wanted* to, even as his sense of propriety protested. Hesitantly, Tezuka's hands found their way to thin shoulders. "You shouldn't settle just because I'm all that's here."

Golden eyes glared up at him. "You don't remember what Sanada's pretext for taking the other players away as my entry fee was? It was my promise with you."

The breath caught in Tezuka's throat. He had forgotten - there was so much going on, so much information to take in... "We're in public," he said, but the protest sounded feeble even to his own ears.

"No one can see. Have you also forgotten that we're invisible?"

"But-"

"No one's here anyway." Ryoma was visibly impatient, fingers starting to trail up his back and bunching the fabric.

That more or less removed the last of his reservations. Tezuka didn't even really register moving - one moment he was drinking in the sight of bright eyes and smooth skin and the next their tongues were interlocking, their bodies pressed together and there were hands in his hair and warm skin under his fingers and it was all heat and feeling and breath and neither of them could seem to get close enough.

It was desperate, rushed and needy. Hands and mouths on any available patch of skin, gasping breaths and sensation so vivid that

Tezuka wondered for a moment if they made it back to the RG under their own power. He'd certainly never felt this *alive* before. The comforting, intangible warmth he recognised as the pact was turning into a fire that positively *sang* beneath his skin.

More than once Tezuka mentally likened the UG to hell, but at that point in time it became heaven.

... Two Days Left

Two Days Left

Two Days Left

Some distant part of Ryoma's mind registered the sudden increase in the ambient noise surrounding them and demanded his attention. He was comfortable, though, and didn't really feel like acknowledging it.

"Echi- Ryoma! Ryoma, wake up."

They'd fallen asleep? With an inarticulate groan he forced his eyes open, wincing at the bright sunlight.

Traffic rumbled past the bus stop, and a car honked its horn in the distance. His head was resting in the crook between Tezuka's shoulder and arm, which made a surprisingly excellent pillow. Their limbs were tangled, their clothing rumpled and pants undone, and Ryoma figured that it was a good thing nobody in the RG could actually see them like this. How did-

Oh, that was right. His face flushed slightly. It had been an idle thought really, but over the course of the day it had grown in his mind until he was fed up and decided just to act on it. In retrospect it wasn't well thought out at all. They really didn't have the time for that sort of thing. It was stupid.

It was worth it.

He slowly sat up, giving Tezuka the room to move. He felt strangely light and... floaty, he supposed. His entire body was sort of tingling. Was this the feeling that everyone talked about when they discussed romance? It sort of felt a little bit like when he went into a state of self-actualisation. It was bit strange to feel it when he wasn't even playing tennis.

"It's the sixth day already," Ryoma murmured, closing his eyes and tilting his face skyward, savouring the sensation.

Tezuka jerked. "Ryoma, your hands!"

He raised his hands in front of his face. They were fading, turning transparent. Alarm pulsed through him, and he hugged them to his body. "No!"

That feeling... it was that feeling! It grew stronger and stronger, and his senses started to shift. It was weird - like music through a radio station not quite tuned to the right frequency. It was calling him, taunting him into twisting the dial just a little so that he could hear it properly. It was beautiful, peaceful, calming, relaxing, inviting-

"I won't!" He yelled, screwing his eyes shut. "Shut up!"

"Ryoma..."

"I won't," he repeated, panting from the effort of resisting. The music seemed to fade slightly, drifting into the background. The high, floaty feeling started to ebb. "I won't." His breathing eased. When Ryoma held up his hands, they were solid again.

"Ryoma-

"We don't have any time to waste," he interrupted. "We never made it to the far side of the mall strip - let's go." He set out at a run, not waiting to see if Tezuka would follow. The heavy footsteps behind him a moment later was all the confirmation he needed. The previous day they'd jogged - this time it was a run, the sort of pace he normally wouldn't be able to keep up for more than 500 metres or so without tiring. He didn't care - he ignored the slight tiredness in his legs and the burning sensation in his lungs, solely focused on scanning as much ground as possible. He picked out two Harriers half a block away, but they weren't what they were after so he ignored them. Snatches of thought from people in the RG whisked past his ears as his senses stretched further and further - he

expanded his scanning to a three-block radius, determinedly pushing back the headache and fuzz.

He was desperate now - Yanagi's estimates had been right on the money. Somehow he managed to resist the call to shift into the higher plane, but even now Ryoma could faintly hear that distorted music. It grew louder while scanning but he ignored it, insulted it; did everything he could to push it away.

It wasn't just his desire to stay. It was Tezuka. Tezuka risked everything to come back and save him. If Ryoma ascended, not only would his efforts have been wasted, but he would also be the one on his own in the UG instead. He wouldn't last three minutes.

Tezuka *killed* himself to save him from erasure. The least Ryoma could do was hang on.

The bliss of the day before already felt like a distant memory. Ryoma tried to cling to it as they ran through the streets, tried to summon the memory and use it to ground himself and draw strength, but it kept slipping through his fingers like smoke.

Then there was a hand clasped in his. It was warm, and the grip was firm, and it felt like electricity was running up his arm. Ryoma glanced back. Tezuka's expression was as neutral as always, but there was softness and a fondness in those dark brown eyes that hadn't been there before.

Or perhaps it had, but it was the first time he noticed.

They ran through the streets hand in hand, ignoring Noise, scanning as much of the UG as they could. They passed the ramen store, then the sports store that sold the Fila wristbands, then the clothing store. Mothers and their children wandered between shops, a group of high school delinquents skipping class ambled along the footpath, young part-timers hurried by on errands; all ignorant of the pair desperately running through the streets, searching for needles in a

haystack. Or not even needles, really - the empty spaces where the needles should be.

Ryoma tore through wall after wall after wall. They broke hands briefly to fight a couple of Reapers who happened to stumble into their path, took care of it in a matter of minutes, then rejoined hands and continued breathlessly searching.

"Ryoma, you can't break through that wall!"

He stopped just before tearing it through it. Paying closer attention, he knew it was true - it was the boundary of the Game. Even if he *could* break through it, who knew what would happen if he did? Did the UG even exist beyond that wall?

Now that they'd finally stopped running, the exertion started to catch up with him. Ryoma had to stop and take a break, gasping to catch his breath. Frustratingly, Tezuka didn't seem to be out of breath at all. "Damn! Where are they?!"

Tezuka thought on it. "Finding Yanagi to get him to lead us to the Composer is maybe the wrong approach."

"Do you have another idea?" Ryoma was willing to take anything at this point. Five days and they hadn't even acquired a clue.

"Sanada."

It was a good idea, but... "Won't he be in Rikkai?"

"But the Composer must be in Seishun. I don't think the Game could run, otherwise."

Realisation dawned on him. "And Sanada is Conductor, so..."

"We follow him," Tezuka concluded. "He has to come here from Rikkai."

It was risky, but no less risky than wasting time running around the UG. "The train station?"

"It's not quite within the boundaries of the Game, but we can get close enough that he shouldn't be able to pass us without our noticing."

Elated that they were finally getting somewhere, Ryoma tugged his partner down by the arm and planted a brief kiss on his cheek. "Good thinking, Buchou. Let's go." He dragged a blushing Tezuka along behind him.

The boundary ended about three blocks from the train station exit. Tezuka found a nice patch of grass underneath a tree facing the boundary and sat cross-legged on the ground. Ryoma immediately settled himself into his lap.

"Ryoma, is it really—" Tezuka's voice sounded a bit strained.

"It's okay now, isn't it? It's comfortable," he interrupted, leaning back against the firm chest. He could feel it rise and fall with each breath.

"Yes, but—"

Honestly, he'd thought that after the day before Tezuka would have loosened up a little. "I promise I'll focus on scanning and not get distracted." Tempting though it was.

He could feel the sigh more than hear it, and Tezuka didn't protest anymore. A pair of arms settled around his waist and Ryoma hummed in approval. He didn't really want to admit it but Tezuka's presence was almost vital in fighting off the call of ascension. It grew more and more insistent, but it seemed like the pact was enough of a tether for him to fight it. Any small thing he could do to affirm that pact, to somehow get closer to his partner... *anything* would help.

And Tezuka's lap was very comfortable. A bonus. "How long do you think it'll be?"

The senior checked his watch. "If he comes to Seishun straight from school, it shouldn't be more than an hour or so."

Ryoma bit his lip. That was *assuming* Sanada came straight to Seishun. "Will we have enough time?" They apparently didn't have any control over when each day started and ended, and the length seemed to vary as well.

The arms around his waist tightened briefly. "We'll just have to hope for the best."

No choices other than just sitting and scanning then. Tezuka might have an inexhaustible well of patience, but Ryoma was anxious. The call only ever got louder when he scanned, and without moving or constantly distracting himself.... Sitting like that though, it should be okay, so he clutched the Player Pin and let his senses expand to cover the area.

It was a mistake. The first ten minutes were fine. The next ten, that light feeling started to return. The music became louder, fuzzy and distorted but unmistakably *calling* .

'*Shut up shut up shut up*,' he chanted in his head.

"Ryoma?" Tezuka sounded concerned. "Do you need to take a break?"

"s'fine," he muttered. He wasn't going to let it get the better of him. If he couldn't handle scanning for this long, how was he supposed to last a whole extra day?

Another ten minutes. The feeling intensified. The sounds of the birds in the trees and the traffic in the background grew fuzzier, and the music sharper.

"Ryoma!"

Startled, he dropped the Player Pin and glanced at his hands. They were turning transparent again. The music surged.

"No!" He screwed his eyes shut, taking deep, gulping breaths. Tezuka! He needed... he groped blindly, but his fingers felt strangely insubstantial. The music was almost deafening now, but he still ignored it.

Cool, calloused fingers caught his face. Ryoma leaned in to the touch, focusing on it, pushing back the call. His arms slid around Tezuka's back as he clung on desperately, as if the mere act of holding on would be enough.

Slowly, so painfully slowly, the call grew quiet again. Ryoma's breathing evened and his body relaxed. Tezuka slowly carded his hand through his hair.

"... Maybe you should."

Ryoma didn't open his eyes, but his fists tightened in Tezuka's shirt all the same. "What do you mean?"

"Ascension is supposed to be an achievement. Perhaps you should. You wouldn't have to suffer through the Game anymore."

"And leave you to be erased by Noise?!"

"I could just outrun them. And there's still a chance I could at least find Yanagi and complete the mission."

There was no chance. Tezuka entered the game illegally - there was no way that they'd return him to the RG unless they took out the Composer themselves. "Not good enough."

"But-"

"I'm not going without you," he responded mulishly. It wasn't about anything else any more. It wasn't about the Game, or Sanada and

Yanagi, or returning to the RG, or tennis, or even Karupin. It was about Tezuka.

"I returned to the RG without you," Tezuka pointed out quietly.

"That was different. You didn't know."

"But it was still dangerous. You found a way. I will too."

Ryoma didn't dignify that with an answer. The music continued to echo quietly in his ears.

... One Day Left

The Last Day

Author's Note: Hooray, the final chapter! And it's super-long. Probably about three chapters worth... but I wanted to keep it to the chapter-a-day pattern.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed, especially those of you weren't already familiar with TWEWY and patiently slogged through it anyway. I hope you enjoy the final chapter.

The Last Day

A bus rumbled to a slow stop in front of them, offloading passengers. The sun was high in the sky.

Ryoma threw his Player Pin to the ground, annoyed. Tezuka picked it up before he could stomp on it, dusted it off, and handed it back to him. He grudgingly accepted it, a little embarrassed to have lost his temper in front of his implacable partner. But they'd waited and waited for Sanada to show so that they could track him to the Composer, and then never got the chance because the day switched over! And now they were out of time!

"What do we do now?" he grumbled.

Tezuka took a long time to answer. It soon became apparent that he didn't have an answer. Since it was the last day, they wouldn't be able to track Sanada - there was a good chance he was already somewhere in Seishun. Some place where he'd magically escaped their notice for the past three weeks.

It was ridiculous. They'd checked *everywhere*, but still hadn't found any sight of Sanada, Yanagi, or the Composer.

Ryoma was on the verge of finding some Noise to go blow up just to let off some frustration when a thought occurred.

... It wasn't quite true - they hadn't checked *everywhere* . There was one place within the Game's boundaries they hadn't checked yet.

Home.

Even though his house was within the boundaries of the Game, he'd given it a wide berth. Home was going to be place he went *after* the Game - he had no desire to see his family's reactions to his death. None of their missions brought them near it either.

"Buchou... I have an idea," Ryoma said hesitantly.

He didn't even ask. "Lead the way," he offered, holding out his hand. Ryoma was a little embarrassed, but took it gratefully. It looked as though Tezuka had guessed that it helped with resisting ascension.

It was weird, walking that familiar path. His skin prickled when they passed the convenience store where they'd been killed, but he ignored it and resolutely kept walking. On one hand, he needed to be right because they were in trouble if he wasn't, but he still desperately wanted to be wrong.

All too soon, they were standing in front of his house. It was only two stories high, but somehow, it *loomed* .

"You think they're here?" Tezuka asked, perplexed.

"Just a hunch," he murmured.

Definitely, there was something off about the house. It wasn't just his own unease of seeing it again, or that anything was particularly out of place... it just didn't give off the same vibe as the other buildings in the UG. It felt bigger than it should have.

Ryoma's attention was diverted when his phone suddenly beeped. It had been so long since he'd last received mail that it startled him. Who would be calling?

He opened the message. '*Rikkai's data master hides in the shadows. Don't be fooled by the illusion .*'

Weird. He handed the phone over to Tezuka, who read it and frowned. "A hint?"

The question was, who from? Mail only ever came from the Game Master, but why would Yanagi be giving them hints?

No point in dwelling on it. Taking a deep breath, he headed up the front path and entered his home.

Nothing. The house was empty - no one was home, which was normal for that time of day, and nothing was out of place.

Except for the black frame with his picture in it and flowers, but Ryoma deliberately avoided looking at that.

"I was sure..." he muttered, frustrated.

"Perhaps you should try scanning," Tezuka suggested.

He didn't see what good it would do, but gripped his Player Pin all the same.

Right in the centre of the living room there was a door.

Startled, he let go of the pin. The door disappeared. He grabbed it again. The door rematerialised. Ryoma swore.

Curious, Tezuka clutched his own Player Pin, and his eyes widened. After a moment, he said, "I'll go first."

"We'll go together," Ryoma retorted stubbornly, grabbing his hand again.

They stepped up to the door. Ryoma took a deep breath, held it, and as one they walked through.

The house disappeared. They were surrounded by mirrors in the middle of the vast room they'd entered at the end of the previous two games. Nobody was there, but there was a door on the far side of the room.

Just as they were stepping towards that, a familiar voice interrupted. "I'm afraid that I can't let you go any further."

Ryoma whirled. Yanagi! But where... the room was still empty!

"You still haven't figured it out? I'm disappointed."

What did the phone say? Rikkai's data master hides in the shadows... but there weren't any shadows in this place!

Except...

Ryoma glanced down at his feet in horror. *His* shadow!

The darkness around his feet elongated, stretching into a familiar silhouette. It snapped, and in a flash of light, Yanagi was standing in front of them again. "This is quite irritating - I didn't expect to be forced to reveal myself like this. By my estimates, you should have been erased yesterday."

"You've been hiding in my shadow this entire time," Ryoma stated numbly.

"Correct. I must say that it has been quite... illuminating."

"Then... when we were..." Tezuka looked mortified. Ryoma thought about it for a moment, then felt his own face heat up.

"Pervert!" He'd been there the *entire* time! Probably feeling smug while they frantically combed the entirety of Seishun's UG for him, too!

Yanagi appeared unfazed by the accusation. "The entire time, yes."

Ryoma grabbed his pins. "And you show yourself now? I guess this must mean we're pretty close to the Composer."

"If you can guess that much, then I definitely cannot allow you to go any further."

"You are welcome to try and stop us," Tezuka said.

The Game Master appeared unworried by the threat. "You cannot defeat me. The probability of your erasure... 100 percent." Yanagi snapped his fingers, and the air shimmered briefly. Tezuka vanished - gone to fight in the other zone again.

Ryoma didn't wait even a moment - he'd been bottling up a lot of resentment for his former partner, and a lot of frustration in general that needed an outlet. He slashed wildly at Yanagi, but the data master sidestepped each of his strikes neatly. He sent out a spray of energy rounds. Yanagi was several safe steps away from the nearest miss.

Annoyed, he sent pillars of fire twisting from the ground, then spread whirlwinds across the room to drag the flames, turning the entire area into a firestorm. See the Game Master try to dodge *that* .

Yanagi vanished. At the very instant Ryoma was finally forced to release the psych from the mental strain, the Game Master reappeared behind his shoulder. The freshman threw himself to the ground and rolled, barely avoiding the psych strike.

"All week I've been watching your movements. Your fighting styles are completely catalogued. None of your pesky little tricks will work." Yanagi disappeared again, just before Ryoma cleaved through the air where he'd been standing not moments before.

He was teleporting! "Che, you're one to talk about cheap tricks." He caught a flash of yellow out the corner of his eyes and whirled, sending out a wide spray lightning bolts. Yanagi vanished again, and Ryoma stumbled forward, clutching his shoulder where the Data

Master struck it from it behind. Fire erupted across the room again, buying him some time to recover.

"Probability of following a fire psych with a lightning psych... 76 percent," Yanagi quipped. Ryoma growled low in his throat, lightning striking a silhouette out the corner of his eyes. It dissipated into shadowy smoke before reforming. Yanagi had switched with a fake. He quickly rolled out of the way, but still felt the faint burn of an energy bolt across his back. From the left? No, he was already gone.

Damn! It wasn't that Yanagi was fast - Kirihara moved around a lot more, and Yagyuu was quicker on the draw - it was that his stupid psych let him instantly get into blind spots and positions that were hard to react to. Those extra few seconds between reactions gave him plenty of time to make a clean shot and teleport to the next spot.

Also, unlike the previous Reapers, it seemed like he was avoiding their retaliation by teleporting between the two zones as well. It was less obvious, as he left a shadowy doppelganger behind that could fool you at a quick glance. It was a sneaky, underhanded way to fight. It was also irritatingly effective. In terms of raw power, Ryoma sensed that Yanagi wasn't a great deal stronger than any of the Harriers they'd fought, but he was still getting battered by the guerrilla attacks.

"It would be wise for you to admit defeat now. You could still become Reapers. It would be a waste of your potential to be erased like this."

Ryoma started bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, eyes darting from side to side, ears strained for the slightest hint of Yanagi's presence.

There! He pushed off from the ground; the air shimmered around his fingers, and the Reaper's eyes actually opened for one brief instant, giving him a clear flash of panic in those dark depths.

Yanagi grimaced as he threw himself backwards, but didn't manage to dodge the blade in time. It left a long, shallow gash in his arm.

Ryoma smirked. "Didn't see that one coming, did you?"

Yanagi frowned; apparently content to ignore his injury. "Your reaction time exceeded my projections. I did not anticipate you would use one-footed split step in a battle context."

"Che. You keep hopping from side to side. It's just like tennis." He darted forward again. The data master's image fuzzed briefly before he vanished, replaced with a shadow doppelganger again. The ball was back in Tezuka's court.

Ryoma kept bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. He ignored the shadow - it wouldn't attack. It was just an idea... would Tezuka get it?

"Ryoma! Don't be careless!" Tezuka's voice called out.

There it was. "Mada mada dane!" There was a flash of yellow out of the corner of his eyes and Ryoma darted to the side again, narrowly avoiding another attack. He started counting down in his head. All he had to do was use a psych that would make sure that Yanagi would definitely flee to the other zone.

"There's nothing you can do to escape your fate. I know all of your psychs, all of your tricks, all of your techniques, and all of their weaknesses." Yanagi peppered the room with force rounds, but Ryoma just sidestepped them lightly. The data master hadn't adjusted to his increased speed just yet.

He withdrew a large light blue pin from his pocket and twirled it between his fingers. "Heh, you think so? I found this pin at the end of the first week. I was saving it for the fight against the Composer, but..."

Finally, he'd managed to stop the Game Master in his tracks. Yanagi eyed the pin curiously. "Oh, you still had something hidden up your sleeve? I suppose you didn't trust me so much after all."

Ryoma grit his teeth and concentrated. Sluggishly, water bubbled from the ground in front of him, curling up into the shape of a tidal wave.

"Useless. Even if it's a new psych, I can simply escape into the next zone." Yanagi vanished as an enormous cascade of water rushed through the room.

Ryoma smirked. "Heh, escape to where?"

"Synchronised attack? Imposs-"

Yanagi didn't even finish his sentence.

The shadow doppelganger vanished, and Tezuka reappeared next to him. There was no hiding from a tidal wave *and* a meteor barrage.

"Well done," Tezuka said.

"Well done yourself," he replied, sticking his hands in his pockets.
"... Does this mean you've got your tennis back?"

"I don't know," Tezuka said. "I'm not sure if I ever actually lost it."

"Ha?"

"Before. When you said that it was like tennis..."

If Tezuka had really lost tennis, would he have known how to react? Ryoma frowned as he thought that over. "That bastard. He lied the entire time so that we'd still look for him."

"As you said at the beginning, I would not be an illegal Player if he actually took an entry fee."

Ryoma was slightly miffed. They might have succeeded in erasing him, but Yanagi had played them right until the end. "Hmph. Then let's see why he was so eager to stop us going through that door."

He stormed over to the plain door set amongst the mirrors and yanked it open.

It led to a dark, dank rocky tunnel, lined with ragged grey spider webs. Ryoma glanced back. Tezuka was still standing in the centre of the room. "Hurry up, Buchou."

It was eerily silent inside the tunnel - even that ever-present music that kept calling him to the higher plane felt muted. Ryoma blindly grabbed a handful of Tezuka's shirt as they walked side-by-side, footsteps echoing loudly in the darkness. There was just enough light to make out the outline of the walls and floor.

They walked in the silence for some time before he became aware of another irregular sound. At first he just thought it was their own footsteps echoing strangely, but when they stopped walking, the sound persisted. Straining his ears, he tried to place it. It was definitely footsteps, but they were too small and soft to be human. A rat?

A small meow echoed off the walls.

Ryoma dropped Tezuka's shirt and ran forward. "Karupin? Karupin?!"

Out of the shadows a form emerged. It was Karupin! Sort of.

It was Karupin in Noise form.

Uncaring, he pulled the cat to his chest and hugged him fiercely. "Karupin!"

Karupin mewled and rubbed his head against Ryoma's cheek. "I thought you were gone! Karupin, I'm so sorry."

"If he was your entry fee..." Tezuka said.

The Conductor must be near. "Yeah." Taking a shuddering breath, Ryoma placed the cat... Noise... back on the ground. "Karupin, stay here, okay? I'll come back for you, I promise."

Karupin's meow sounded rather discontent, and the Noise rubbed against his ankles.

"No, stay. It's dangerous."

Somewhat sulkily, Karupin pattered off into the darkness again. Ryoma watched him go with mixed feelings.

"Even though he was a Noise, he still remembered you," Tezuka observed.

Ryoma smiled slightly. "Yeah."

Just ahead lay a single, non-descript black door. Ryoma shared a glance with Tezuka, who nodded slightly and went to open it.

The previous room was bright and stark, with marble floors, walls of mirrors, and no other features to speak of. This room was its polar opposite - dark and cavernous, with an enormous decorative sigil on the floor and a twisted, black throne right in front of it. It looked like rather appropriate accommodations for a Composer.

Sitting on the throne was one familiar, pale, wavy blue-haired individual.

"Welcome Players." The voice echoed eerily off the walls. "But then, you're not Players anymore, are you?" Yukimura said sweetly. "Now you are simply dead."

"Composer," Tezuka greeted levelly.

"You already knew? You don't seem very surprised," Yukimura observed.

Ryoma folded his arms behind his head. "It was pretty obvious. Half of your team was here; it wouldn't make any sense if you weren't."

"The only ones we haven't seen so far are Marui and Jackal. Why is that?" Tezuka asked.

Yukimura smiled. "Oh, they'll be coming soon. But I wanted to make sure things were a little more stable before bringing them in." He frowned. "If you're here, though, I suppose that means Renji didn't make it. That's quite a shame."

Sanada emerged from the shadows and stepped up next to the throne. "I'm sorry, Yukimura. I thought he was up to the task."

The Composer waved him off. "If he wasn't strong enough, then that was his fate."

"You brought them into the game." Ryoma recognised that slight clipping of Tezuka's words. He was angry.

"Certainly. Renji was quite eager to participate, but the others required some... convincing."

"And then you left Rikkai and invaded Seishun's UG. Why?"

"Oh, don't misunderstand. There's nothing special about Seishun - it was merely so *confining*, running only that one game. I wanted to broaden our horizons." Yukimura shifted in his throne briefly. "Things were going quite wonderfully until you came along."

"It's not like we *planned* to die," Ryoma pointed out.

"You say that, but your deaths weren't a coincidence," Yukimura stated. "Seishun isn't the first district we've taken over. It was only a matter of time until those annoying beings on the Higher Plane started to take notice. I guess one of them finally took action."

Ryoma considered that carefully. Was this what Fuji intended all along? For this moment, when he and Tezuka would challenge Yukimura and Sanada? But then if the Composer *knew* that, why on earth would he let him play the Game enough times to the point where he'd be a threat? If he'd just returned them both to the RG at the end of the first week it would never have come to this.

"And you and Sanada? How did *you* die?" Tezuka asked.

Sanada stepped up then, face cast in shadow. "It's not your concern--"

"Tell them, Sanada," Yukimura interrupted, sounding eerily pleased. "I think that they deserve to know."

Sanada paused. It was plainly obvious he didn't want to disclose it, but it was also obvious that he considered Yukimura's word law. "Very well." He turned back to them. "That day, when we played Seigaku... Yukimura didn't survive his operation. That's how he found out about the game."

"Then even in the Nationals..." Realisation dawned on Ryoma. "Your techniques! You were using psychs in the RG!"

Yukimura smiled. "Rules for Composers are a little different. Even if I'm on a lower frequency, I still maintain a fraction of my power."

"That's cheating," Tezuka pointed out coldly.

"Is it? I was just using everything I had available. And anyway, Echizen still won."

Ryoma turned his gaze back to the Conductor. Sanada was staring at him, and he was faintly alarmed to see genuine *hate* in his eyes. "And you?"

"Suicide."

His throat was dry, but he forced out the next word anyway. "Why?"

The glare intensified. "Yukimura didn't survive because I didn't make it there in time. I was stuck playing a game against Seigaku. I couldn't live with the guilt, so I killed myself. And that was when I discovered the game. Yukimura and I made a pact, and took out Rikkai's Composer and Conductor."

It made sense, then. Why Sanada, if not Yukimura, was so keen to get him erased in the game.

It was just a simple expansion of territory at first maybe, but then the perceived source of Sanada's misery and the impudent mortal who dared defeat Yukimura as a Composer suddenly fell into their laps - thrown there by Fuji, but they probably didn't know that at the time.

Even if they were proxies sent in by Fuji, it would have been a simple matter to decide to grant them both life at the end of the first game, instead of only Tezuka, and the threat would be gone. But they'd risked putting him through the game a second time. Sure, it was to smooth the way for Yanagi and get rid of Arai, probably one of the few remaining Reapers who actually belonged in Seishun's boundaries, but he didn't think they'd anticipated that Arai would get his hands on Taboo Noise and prove to be that much of a threat. Or that Ryoma would actually erase an old team mate and complete the game again. He'd been getting strong at that point. Strong enough that if they tried to erase him forcibly, there was a risk of losing a lot of Reapers while doing so.

The only way to erase him was by using the game. But then Tezuka had crashed back in illegally, and considerably more powerful himself.

It was all for revenge. Sanada blamed him for Yukimura's death and was willing to take any risk to have him erased. He'd even gone so far as to hide in UG subspace underneath his house.

Unlucky for Sanada that Ryoma just didn't know how to lose.

"Whatever your reasons, you've gone too far," Tezuka stated levelly. "I'm sorry that it has come to this, but we will not go quietly."

"You're a fool to challenge us," Sanada said coldly. "We're far stronger than you."

"We won't sit idly by and face erasure," Tezuka replied steadily.

Yukimura stood and placed a gentle hand on his Conductor's arm. "You've made it this far. I'd think it a terrible shame to lose so much potential. You can still ask to become Reapers, you know."

Ryoma's hands shook as he clutched a pin. "And have you find some way to get rid of us, like you did to Arai?"

Yukimura's eyes turned cold. "He was useless, and a holdout from past times. I gave him a chance to redeem himself, and he flaunted the rules by creating Taboo Noise."

"He was just a Wall Reaper. He should never have been made Game Master in the first place," Tezuka interjected.

There was a long silence as the two sides faced off.

Yukimura sighed and tucked a stray lock of blue hair behind his ear. "There's no helping it, then."

Space warped around them.

Unlike the previous battles, Ryoma could *feel* the energy suffused in the air. It made the flesh on his arms prickle and his ears buzz faintly.

Sanada stood across from him, holding a katana. It was faintly transparent, and the sharp curves of grey and black on the hilt reminded him of the Taboo Noise. "I've been looking forward to this moment," he said, taking stance.

Ryoma adjusted his cap, slipping a pin between his fingers. "Che. All this because you lost a tennis match?"

Sanada's eyes *burned* with anger. "It wasn't just a tennis match!" He dashed forward, swinging the sword down violently. Ryoma dodged easily and parried the follow-up slash. Trying to follow the path of the transparent blade made his eyes hurt, but he matched the Conductor blow for blow.

"It would have happened either way," he remarked, parrying another strike and leaping away, taking a minute to rub at his eyes. Sanada darted in again, and he hurriedly fired off a series of force rounds, buying a few seconds to prepare as the Conductor had to change his approach.

"It was because I didn't make it! I broke our promise!" A thin cut opened on Ryoma's cheek as he barely avoided the sweep of the blade.

"Don't blame me for it. It's your own fault if you weren't strong enough to win." That barb clearly struck, and Sanada charged forward with a new burst of speed. Ryoma hastily spun to the side, grateful for the extra speed that split-step gave him. He hadn't thought he would be much good against someone trained in swordsmanship, but he seemed to be doing okay so far. Pillars of fire surrounded him, forcing Sanada to back off.

A pulse of energy throbbed in the air. Ryoma paused. "Buchou?" he called out, worried by the wavering he sensed in the pact. Sanada was tough, but he was only Conductor - Tezuka was facing off against Composer level power.

After a moment, the bond grew steady again. "Don't worry about me, pay attention!" Tezuka ordered.

Reflexively, Ryoma started moving again, attacking Sanada relentlessly. He spun and slashed and parried and blocked and battered his opponent with psych after psych after psych. The Conductor was visibly starting to lose his cool as he was pushed back. Taking advantage of his opponent's hesitation Ryoma summoned a series of tornadoes, then grabbed his lightning pin and sent forth a twisting dragon of electricity. A black cap went flying in the roaring wind.

Ryoma waited as long as he could, then reluctantly released the psychs. When the wind died down Sanada wasn't standing there any

longer. Instead it was Yukimura, eyes closed and wearing a gentle smile.

"Sanada, I think I'd better take over here."

Ryoma could hear Sanada's voice, even though he'd vanished - presumably into the same frequency zone as Tezuka. "But Yukimura-"

"I know you're upset, but I also have business to settle with Echizen. A certain defeat at the Nationals that I feel the need to rectify," he said sweetly. When he opened his eyes they glowed faintly with power. Ryoma took an unconscious step backwards.

He barely dodged the blast of pure white energy - split step was all that saved him. For the first time in a battle, he felt genuine *fear*. If he didn't dodge - he wouldn't have even known what happened. That attack would erase him in one hit.

"You're quick on your feet." Yukimura glowed faintly, surrounded by a barely visibly aura that brightened by the minute. Ryoma cycled through his pins for a moment, trying to gauge which one would be the best bet. Moments later he was scrambling to avoid another blast of energy; this time coming so close it burnt the brim of his cap. He threw it to the side.

Yanagi had been tough. This was *terrifying*. Yukimura was just raw power - it was oppressive and suffocating. It stifled his senses and made it so hard to focus and call his psychs and the music warbled strangely...

He needed to fight back, quickly! He dismissed any psych that took too much concentration - it would make him a sitting duck for that attack. But then...

Yukimura was just *standing* there. The aura grew brighter slowly.

He had to charge the attack!

That meant there was a chance.

Ryoma switched to his fire pin - it hadn't let him down yet. A moment of later an enormous pillar of fire surrounded Yukimura, twisting towards the ceiling in an explosion of light and heat.

When smoke cleared, Yukimura was unscathed. Ryoma was so dumbfounded that he almost forgot to dodge the next attack. At the last instant, he threw himself to the side.

The blast only clipped him, but the pain was unbearable. He hit the floor and rolled, eyes screwed shut in agony. It took a moment to force himself up and take a nervous look at his right side. It wasn't burnt as he expected, but what he saw was so much more frightening - his arm and leg were fuzzed and distorted, wavering between solidity and transparency, twinging with every static flicker.

He couldn't risk getting hit by that again. Not even another close call.

"Echizen?" Tezuka called, worry clouding his voice.

"Worry about yourself," he muttered through gritted teeth, pushing himself back into a standing position. After the initial burst of pain his side was slowly turning curiously numb, but he was hardly incapacitated. Just because he couldn't feel his arm and leg properly didn't mean that he couldn't use them. He gathered his wits in time to dodge the next attack.

He grabbed his lightning pin next and sent forth another snapping beam of lightning. It stopped short an arm's width away from Yukimura, dissipating into harmless static sparks as the air shimmered. Again! How...?

It was a shield! A dome of energy glimmered around Yukimura as he floated some twenty centimetres off the ground.

"Come now, Echizen," Yukimura coaxed, "I expect better from someone who defeated Renji."

Desperate, he cycled through pin after pin after pin. Psychokinesis. Force rounds. Energy rounds. Tornadoes. He even risked going in close to try and cut through it. The shield did not falter.

It was like the Nationals all over again. No matter what attack he used, nothing had an effect. Eventually one of Yukimura's blasts would hit him again, and it would all be over.

Wait....

Ryoma paused, then sent another strong barrage of force rounds at the shield. It shimmered irregularly, then brightened back to full strength once the barrage ended.

Again he sent another round, eyes focused intensely on the shield.

It shimmered then...

He was right. For just an instant at the end of the barrage, the shield disappeared!

It was like a psych! Even Yukimura couldn't keep it up for so long without restarting it. He was fast on activation - so fast that it only looked like a flicker. But an instant was enough.

Ryoma twirled a pin in-between his fingers. His eyes were trained on his opponent, noting every twitch, every movement. When Yukimura fired his next impossibly powerful attack, he was well ahead, already moving. It would only work once. He could not miss.

Three tornadoes surrounded the shield, battering it with powerful wind. It held steady.

"Just because you defeated me at the Nationals does not mean you will do so here. This is different from tennis. I'm much stronger in the UG," Yukimura stated calmly, completely unaffected.

Ryoma didn't respond. He clutched his fire pin next. Flames curled from the ground, sucked towards the Composer by the wind into one

massive firestorm. He was obscured from sight by an all-encompassing wall of flame.

"Two psychs at once. I'll acknowledge that you have some promise, but it's nowhere near enough to defeat me!" Yukimura sounded outwardly sure of himself, but Ryoma could swear he heard hesitation in the words.

Straining to keep the other two psychs active, Ryoma activated his lightning pin next, running towards his target. A dragon of lightning leapt forth, twisting and darting towards the firestorm, a giant monster of electricity crackling hungrily through the air. It blasted into the shield at full speed.

"Even then, it's not enough!" Yukimura called. "Was that your best shot?" The flames and lightning cleared before him.

There .

For just an instant, the shield was down. In that instant, Ryoma struck.

Yukimura's eyes widened as he looked down. He shakily took a step back.

The psych blade Ryoma held sputtered and died.

Yukimura staggered away, clutching at his chest. "Impossible... All that power... just to hide such a simple attack..."

Ryoma struggled to catch his breath. It was only for a moment, but if his opponent wasn't expecting it, a moment was long enough for him to get past the shield.

"No..." Yukimura coughed weakly. "No, I was the strongest... the strongest..." His image distorted and fuzzed erratically.

Then, without any fanfare whatsoever, he was simply gone. Erased.

"Yukimu-!" Sanada's strangled cry was cut short.

A second later, Tezuka reappeared by his side. The giant room was suddenly eerily silent.

"Heh." Ryoma smirked, but it felt a bit wobbly. "Game, set and match." He sank to his knees.

"Echizen! Your-"

"It'll be okay, I can't feel it at all," he insisted, and focused blearily on his partner. Tezuka was sporting a couple of nasty-looking cuts that were oozing blood. "You should take care of that first."

Naturally Tezuka ignored him, fumbling for his healing pin and laying him down. It took a while to restore his right arm and leg properly, and Ryoma had a feeling that he'd have pins and needles for a while, but soon enough he was able to bully the senior into taking care of his own injuries. In a reasonable amount of time they were both more or less patched up. Ryoma didn't really feel like moving from his position in Tezuka's arms just yet, though. Tezuka didn't seem in a real rush to go anywhere, either.

"Are you sure you're okay?" the senior asked.

"M'fine," he mumbled. "You're really good with that pin."

"That wasn't what I meant, exactly."

Ah, that. "It's funny," Ryoma said, stretching a hand in front of him. It remained reassuringly solid. "I don't... it's not calling, anymore. The music is still there, but it's like there something else..."

There was one part of their plan - to take out the Composer before the Game could take them out - that they had forgotten about.

"You took his place," Tezuka breathed. Ryoma defeated Yukimura. And whoever defeated the Composer...

Ryoma sat up abruptly, suddenly excited. "We did it. Buchou, we did it."

Tezuka nodded slowly. "We did..."

The sound of clapping echoed through the cavernous chamber. A familiar figure walked towards them.

"Fuji, what are you doing here?" Tezuka asked. Ryoma reached for a pin.

The enigmatic prodigy was unfazed, sticking his hands in his pockets and greeting them with a smile. "I'm here to say hello the new Composer, of course."

Ryoma glared. "This is all your fault. You *used* us! You're one of those people from the higher plane," he accused.

Fuji held up his hands disarmingly. "You caught me. I've been the Producer of Seishun for quite a while."

"Producer?" Tezuka asked.

"That's right. I spend most of my time in the RG, of course. We're not really allowed to interfere directly. Our job is technically just to make sure that the Composers don't go breaking any rules."

Ryoma scowled. "And nobody stopped Yukimura?"

Fuji's smile grew a little strained. "Ah, well, that was a bit of a messy affair, you see. We don't get too many people trying to take over other UGs - one is usually enough work as it is. The pair of them took over quite a few before they reached here, but I couldn't just let them waltz on through."

"So you killed us," Ryoma stated coldly.

"No need to put it so harshly. And Tezuka wasn't planned. I just thought that since Echizen defeated Yukimura in tennis even when he had the advantage of Composer powers, then he'd definitely be able to manage on a level playing field." Fuji's smile faltered a little there. "However I didn't take Sanada's grudge into account."

"So you gave me the gun, so that I could re-enter the game and Echizen could survive the last week," Tezuka surmised.

"Actually," Fuji said, "I thought you'd use the gun to take out Sanada or Yukimura in the RG. But that way worked too."

Ryoma actually had to hide a grin at the look of utter incredulity on his partner's face.

Fuji sighed dramatically. "And even my back up plan with Arai failed spectacularly."

The grin disappeared and was replaced by a scowl. "You were the one who taught him how to make Taboo Noise?"

Fuji rubbed the back of his head. "Saa... I'll probably get into a bit of a trouble for that. But hopefully with the circumstances..."

Ryoma didn't believe for an instant that Fuji had done anything he couldn't wriggle out of. Before he could remark as such, Tezuka haltingly enquired, "Fuji, one more thing. My Player Pin..."

The Producer smiled cheerily. "Oh, that? I actually make the Player Pins for the game. You just happened to get a special batch..."

Ryoma rolled his eyes. "Hedge your bets much?" he mumbled.

Fuji diplomatically ignored that comment. "It all worked out in the end. Although things are going to be a bit hectic for a while. Thanks to Yukimura's little escapade, all of the wards between Seishun and Rikkai are without a Composer."

Ryoma felt his skin crawl at the thought. "I don't have to take over all those UGs too, do I?" He'd be running Games every other week!

"Oh, you don't need to worry about anything other than Seishun. The Producers for those wards will step in temporarily until replacement Composers can be found."

A small relief. "So what now?" he asked. He wanted to hear the so-called 'Producer' out before he introduced him to a few friendly psychs, and maybe a good old-fashioned punch to the face while he was at it.

"You're Composer now, so it's mostly up to you. Although..." Fuji shuffled his feet briefly, smile growing a little strained again. "I'm sorry to say that Echizen can't return to the RG anymore. It would be difficult even if you *weren't* Composer... As it is, it's sort of amazing that you haven't ascended already, but I suppose we have Tezuka to thank for that."

At that instant Ryoma felt cold, but he knew what he had to do. Knew it would be the hardest thing he'd ever done, but it was the *right* thing to do.

Dark brown eyes turned to him. Tezuka seemed to have already guessed what he was thinking. "Not without you."

"You already gave up so much." Tezuka had earned his chance to return to life. It wasn't fair that he threw it away just to save him. It was in his power to give it back.

"It doesn't mean anything if-"

He smiled faintly and pulled the senior down, gently pressing their lips together for the briefest of moments. "Thanks, Buchou. I couldn't have made it without you," he murmured into the kiss. Ryoma closed his eyes and instinctively sought out the power, tendrils of music whispering instructions in his ears. He couldn't hesitate for even a moment, or he'd lose his resolve.

"No, Ryoma-!"

Tezuka disappeared in a flash of light.

Ryoma took a deep breath, and shakily felt his way to the throne. The loss of the pact always hit hard. His legs felt weak after expending that much energy, and he gratefully sat down.

"Not bad for your first go. You didn't even need instructions," Fuji commented approvingly. "I made a good choice."

"Shut up," Ryoma mumbled tiredly. He was dead for good now, Composer or not. He'd grown used to the idea over the past three weeks, but that didn't mean it wasn't a depressing notion.

It looked like he wouldn't be able to keep his promise after all. But Tezuka was safe. That was all that counted.

A small mewl echoed off the walls of the cavern. A moment later, Karupin ran up to his former master, apparently having sensed that the course was clear. The newly christened Composer bent down and picked the Noise up, hugging him to his chest. It was very quiet all of a sudden, and the already large cavern felt oppressively enormous.

"Are you sure it was the right thing to do?" Fuji eventually asked, breaking the heavy silence.

"You're still here?" Ryoma replied dully. "Don't think I'm going to forgive you for everything you've done so easily."

The senior, Angel, Producer - whatever he was - seemed to sense he'd pushed his luck enough for one day. "I'll come around again tomorrow and tell you about the rest of the rules and workings of the Game, then."

"Whatever." He stroked his cat's fur - it was a mixture of chocolate brown and swirls of coffee now, and his tail was sort of spiky, but the

motion was still familiar and soothing. Ryoma didn't look up until he sensed Fuji was gone.

Now the room was truly silent - or as silent as it could ever be. Music still filtered through to him - snatches of melodies that flowed past his ears, and a gentle beat that he suspected was the heartbeat of the UG. It appeared that the term Composer was more than just a name.

With a sigh, he rolled his head back and stared up at the black ceiling. It was so terribly overdramatic. He'd need to redecorate.

At least he had Karupin. It could have been a lot worse.

Game Over.

...

The alarm trilled. Tezuka opened his eyes. It was Sunday.

He got dressed slowly. There was movement downstairs, and when he headed down his mother was in the middle of putting breakfast out on the table. "Good morning Kunimitsu," she greeted cheerfully. "Did you sleep well?"

He sat down. "Yes, thank you."

"You have practice this morning?" she asked.

It was hard to remember. Eventually, he nodded. There was usually practice on Sunday mornings - no reason that one should be any different. She smiled and served out his food. "Just a moment, I'll go drag your father out of bed." Clucking her tongue, she left the room.

His grandfather came in a moment later. They exchanged customary greetings and waited for the rest of the family to arrive before starting breakfast. His father was the last one into the dining room; yawning hugely and blinking the sleep back from his eyes. His grandfather made several disapproving remarks, and his father made several excuses about work as they started breakfast.

It was so normal.

"Kunimitsu... is something the matter?" His mother sounded concerned.

Belatedly, he realised that he'd stopped eating. "No... I don't think so." His chest felt strangely tight. He clutched his chopsticks harder.

His father shooed her away. "It's only been a couple of weeks since that freshman in your club died, hasn't it? It's alright to grieve."

Grieving? That was right. Echizen. It was such a loss for the club, such a tragedy. So much potential that would never be realised. But it had almost been a month - he shouldn't keep dwelling on it. He needed to hold it together for the team - especially since some of the juniors had been absent, and Inui was grieving over Yanagi as well.

"Better that the dead be honoured by moving on," his grandfather said gravely. "When my times comes, I don't want anyone moping about."

"You'll probably outlive us all," his father mumbled.

"Kuniharu!"

Tezuka felt numb. There was something important. Something he'd forgotten...

"It's fine," he replied, and resumed eating. His parents exchanged a glance, but nothing more was said.

An hour later he was riding the bus to Seigaku. The scenery scrolled past in a blur of colour. A college student nearby was listening to her music so loud that it could be heard even through the headphones. A businessman was leafing through a magazine. A freshman student who regularly caught the same bus was asleep in the back, but woke up just as they arrived at their stop. The routine never changed.

Tezuka paused after disembarking. Something felt different about the bus stop. He glanced at the display, but the clock affirmed that the bus had arrived right on time as usual. Nothing was out of place - students with clubs that had Sunday practices were shuffling past, chattering amongst themselves. Traffic rumbled on the street nearby, drowning out the twitter of birdsong and rustling of the wind.

The feeling of forgetfulness grew more intense. Bothered, he checked his racquet bag, searching for whatever it was he might have left behind. His racquet, wristbands and grip tape were all there, though. He checked his pockets next. Phone and wallet were there too.

His fingers brushed against an unfamiliar object. Curious, he pulled it from his pocket.

It was a small round black pin with an odd skull design on it. A hairline crack zigzagged across the centre. How unusual. It didn't look like something of his - Tezuka was never one to accessorise, and certainly not with something in that sort of style - but there was something odd about the pin that he found strangely compelling.

"Tezuka!" Oishi waved from the school gates and ran up to greet him. He paused a couple of steps away. "Tezuka... are you... crying?"

Tezuka tentatively raised a hand to his face, confused when he felt the tracks of water there. "I... I don't..."

"Is something the matter? Did something happen? Are you hurt? Do you need to see a doctor?" Oishi fretted. Tezuka had never cried in front of him before - not even when his arm had been injured or their senpai would pick on him.

"No, no, I'm... just..." He blinked rapidly and wiped away the tears. Why was he crying? He wasn't sad, or in pain. He gripped the pin tighter in his hands.

He didn't understand. What was he crying for?

"I'm fine," he eventually said. "Practice is about to begin."

Oishi looked as though he was about to say something else, but thought better of it. "I'll... I'll go on ahead and get things started then. You take your time."

"Thank you."

The vice-captain hurried off, sending one last worried glance back at him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tezuka thought he caught a glimpse of a white cap across the road. As he turned to look, a truck drove by. By the time it passed, the footpath was empty.

Tezuka stared at the cracked black pin in his hand for a long time, fingers carefully tracing the edges. He carefully slid it back into his pocket, and set off towards the courts at a light jog. He was going to be late for practice.

...